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September 2026

Welcome Back?

Reasons for emigration and potential for return migration among EU and third-country nationals who have emigrated from Germany

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Foreword

Demographic change and the increasing shortage of skilled labour represent both an economic and a socio-political challenge.

While there is much political discussion about the recruitment of labour and skilled workers from abroad, a crucial aspect often remains unnoticed; the high number of those who leave Germany again. Although over twelve million people migrated to Germany between 2015 and 2022, over seven million turned their backs on the country again. This emigration is more just a statistical indicator – it raises fundamental questions about Germany’s attractiveness as a country of immigration.

This is the first study to comprehensively examine the reasons why EU and third-country nationals emigrate from Germany while also asking under which conditions these people would return. After all, those who have already lived here, speak the language and know the society, could be an important building block for a sustainable migration policy. However, the results clearly show: The decision to leave Germany is rarely motivated by economic factors alone. Rather, it is social isolation, bureaucratic obstacles, experiences of discrimination and a lack of promotion opportunities that lead to migrants feeling as though Germany does not provide a good quality of life in the long term.

If Germany wants to be an attractive location for international talent and skilled workers, it not only needs to create a better offer for new immigrants, but also win back those who have already gained valuable experience in the country. A migration policy is needed that goes beyond short-term recruitment strategies and focuses in the long term on how immigrants live in Germany and build a future here.

This study aims to provide an impetus for this debate. It provides facts and figures, but also shows where political, economic and social measures must be taken to make Germany more attractive to migrants both as a destination and as a place to live. Ultimately, a successful immigration policy is not only measured by who comes – but also by who stays.

Joana Marta Sommer and Annette Schlicht

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Summary

Migration is rarely a linear phenomenon: Immigration is often followed by renewed emigration, embedded in a complex, open and not always long-term migration process. Official statistics illustrate that many people immigrate to Germany each year, but a large number of immigrants also leave the country again. The net migration of certain immigration groups, e.g.

from the new EU member states, has significantly declined in recent years. The high emigration figures are not only worrying in light of the shortage of skilled labour, but also with regard to our society's capacity for integration and openness. A key question in this respect is to what extent social and (labour market) policy conditions

in Germany impede equal participation and thus trigger unwanted emigration processes. The question also arises about which strategies are needed to position Germany as a desirable place to live and work in the long term. A consideration that has been hitherto neglected is also coming to the fore: Which specialists and workers could be recruited to return – and under what conditions?

The aim of this study is to gain a more in-depth understanding about the phenomenon of emigration and return migration. In particular, the existing research gap regarding the intentions and motives of return and onward migration following emigration from Germany is to be further closed. The study therefore focuses on people from EU and third countries who immigrated to Germany in the past, but have now left the country again.

Methodologically, the study is based on a standardised, non-representative online survey of emigrants. Since the target group is no longer registered in Germany and is scattered across various countries, the survey was conducted via various social media channels to ensure the broadest possible reach. The sample consists of 416 people. Those who are highly qualified with a university degree are clearly overrepresented.

The study provides valuable insights into the past living reality of the respondents in Germany as well as their current living situation in the new country of residence and reveals reasons for emigration along with future migration plans. Although the study design does not enable representative

results, they do offer important exploratory insights. They also reflect current political, economic, and social conditions and thus contribute to further research and discussion about migration movements.

Key findings

The results of the study clearly show that the emigration and possible return of immigrants to Germany are closely linked to their life satisfaction, social integration and perception of social conditions in Germany as well as in their country of residence. While economic factors

such as labour market opportunities or financial stability play an important role, the data shows that respondents' decision to emigrate and their willingness to return must be understood in connection with social aspects in particular – such a sense of belonging, satisfaction with the social environment and, and a welcoming culture. The study raises important questions about German society's ability to integrate and its openness.

Successful labour market integration does not automatically lead to social participation

In our sample, which mainly consists of highly qualified workers, occupational and education-related factors are the main reasons for immigrating to Germany. Psychosocial reasons, such as the feeling of being at ease or welcome in Germany, tend to take a back seat in the sample when choosing Germany as a destination country. However, these factors become increasingly important during the course of the stay. Especially social isolation and a lack of opportunities to make connections are perceived as key challenges that later influence decisions to emigrate. This highlights how successful labour market integration does not automatically lead to social participation.

Emigration processes are complex

A key finding of this study is that decisions to emigrate are above all complex and multi-faceted. While immigration is often triggered by specific reasons, emigration is less frequently due to one single, clearly definable reason. It is particularly worth noting the role of psychosocial factors: Many immigrants report not feeling comfortable or welcome and express dissatisfaction with their social life in Germany. This is followed by financial and professional

reasons such as high living costs and unsatisfactory working conditions. In the destination country, a sense of belonging, better working conditions and a higher quality of life are the critical pull factors.

The study results also show differences between respondents who return to their country of origin from Germany, and those who migrate further to a third country. Among the latter, work-related dissatisfaction is much more important when it comes to emigration – far more than among respondents who return to their country of origin.

Overall, respondents are more satisfied with their social life in the new country of residence than in Germany; regardless of whether they are in a third country or in their country of origin at the time of the survey. Nevertheless, a large proportion would have liked to live longer in Germany, especially those who emigrated as a result of residence permit issues or a lack of career prospects.

Negative experiences with the German welcome culture inhibit the potential for return migration

At the same time, emigration harbours a certain potential for return: 39.5 percent of respondents consider returning to Germany, with language skills, familiarity with the system and personal ties playing a role. This idea is particularly prevalent among those who would have liked to stay longer, but had to emigrate due to residence law provisions or temporary study visits. However, it remains unclear whether and when these plans will actually be realised, as many have not yet taken any concrete steps and do not envisage returning to Germany within the next twelve months. The most common obstacles to returning include finding work and housing. Those who have had negative experiences with the welcome culture, have experienced discrimination or were dissatisfied with their social life in Germany, on the other hand, are less likely to consider returning.

1.

Introduction¹

Demographic change and the increasing shortage of labour and skilled workers poses major challenges to the German labour market. According to forecasts by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), labour supply could fall by over seven million people by 2035 if no countermeasures are taken (Fuchs et al. 2021). In this context, the recruitment of labour and specialist workers from abroad plays a crucial role. However, incentives for immigration alone will not achieve this; after all, migration decisions can be reversed. Between 2015 and 2023, a total of 13,651,000 people without German citizenship immigrated to Germany, while 7,915,000 emigrated again. This results in a net migration of 5.7 million over this period. If we only look at arrivals and departures outside of asylum countries of origin and Ukraine, net migration over the past eight years falls to 3.3 million people (Federal Statistical Office) (Destatis) 2024d).

What the official statistics do not tell us are the motives behind immigration and, in particular, emigration. Is it more attractive conditions in other destination countries – such as better earning opportunities, cheaper living costs or stronger family ties in the country of origin – that motivate immigrants to turn their backs on Germany? Or do emigrations possible reflect structural challenges and deficits in Germany, such as bureaucratic hurdles, a lack of promotion opportunities, social exclusion or the absent sense of belonging and recognition? Understanding the motives for emigration, both in Germany and in the destination countries, is far more than a labour market policy necessity in order to meet the need for skilled workers. Rather, the answers to these questions could provide insights into immigrants' perception of quality of life in Germany and how welcome and respected they feel in society. At the same time, they serve as a benchmark for Germany's equality of participation and welcome culture, as well as the openness of Germany society towards skilled workers and labour from abroad.

Despite this emigration dynamic, only a few studies to date have closely analysed the experiences and motives of those who have already migrated and have thus undergone the entire decision-making and emigration process. This target group is also interesting because it not only provides insights into the decision-making process that led to emigration from Germany, but also – unless they have returned to their country of origin – can also reflect on their experiences

upon arriving and living in a new country of residence. This perspective makes it possible to view the perception of Germany in comparison with other countries and thus better understand what is perceived as negative, positive or supportive about the new realities of life. It is essential to ask about the reasons for emigration that lie in Germany itself (push factors) as well as those that originate in the destination country, whether it be the country of origin or a third country (pull factors). Only by understanding both perspectives can a full picture of the migration processes and underlying factors emerge. When analysing the reasons for emigration, a second dimension must also be taken into account: where people moved to after emigrating – back to their countries of origin or to other third countries. Migration is rarely a linear process. Immigration is often followed by emigration, which is part of a complex, open-ended and not always long-term planned for migration process. In this respect, emigration is not problematic per se. On the contrary, especially in light of the brain drain in many regions of origin, it is desirable for people to return to their countries of origin of their own accord and contribute their acquired qualifications and international experience and networks there. Special attention should be given to the dynamic of emigration especially when it is caused by social or (labour market) policy conditions in Germany that hinder the equal participation of immigrants and thus motivate them to emigrate again, even though they did not originally want or plan to do so.

From a labour market policy viewpoint, the high emigration figures are alarming in view of the shortage of skilled workers on the one hand, while they also harbour potential because the emigrants are people who already have relevant work and life experience in Germany, on the other. They know the language, culture and working methods in his country. Winning them back could be a strategy to counteract the shortage of skilled labour. Initial surveys show that many of these former immigrants are interested in returning to Germany (Schramm 2023; Boockmann et al. 2022). While research increasingly examines the motives and processes of emigration among immigrants, the potential for return migration, and the associated motives and obstacles among emigrants have been subject to little research to date. Surveying emigrants about their interest in returning or their intentions of returning to Germany indicates the extent to which they represent a potential target group for

¹ The authors would like to thank Marius Castello for his support in drawing up the survey.

the recruitment or return of labour. Analysing their motives and obstacles to return makes it possible to develop targeted strategies to address these people and to shape the framework conditions in Germany such that a return becomes more attractive for them.

This study therefore aims to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of emigration and return migration. In particular, it intends to further close gaps in research regarding intentions and motives for returning and onward migration following emigration from Germany. To this end, target group² of the survey includes those

- who neither grew up nor were born in Germany,
- who have immigrated to Germany in the past and
- were living abroad again at the time of the survey, i.e. had emigrated back to their country of origin or another country.

The initial focus is on the analysis of factors that result in people leaving the country, both in Germany and in the destination countries. A further aim is to determine which political, social, and economic conditions in Germany contribute towards emigration and what would have to change for people to decide to stay longer.

The second focus is on analysing the potential for return migration. The goal is to find out the degree to which emigrants are interested in returning to Germany and which factors influence this decision. This should identify starting points for promoting return migration and a possible target group approach for the recruitment of skilled labour.

The correlations between the factors that lead to decisions to emigrate and the potential motives for return are also analysed so as to develop a holistic understanding of the motives and possibilities for promoting return migration. The methodological core of the study is a standardised, non-representative online survey of emigrants, which was disseminated via social media using various strategies.

To start with, the state of research is depicted below and the existing gap in research is highlighted. The main findings from previous migration research are summarised with a special focus on survey studies on immigration, emigration and return migration. Chapter 2 presents the survey design and sample description. The methodological approach is explained here; in particular, the questionnaire development and field access via social media. The following chapter 3 deals with the results of the survey. Chapter

3.1 is dedicated to the original decision to immigrate to Germany and the stay in the country by analysing the reasons for immigration as well as the experiences and challenges of the respondents during their stay in Germany. The next step (Chapter 3.2) analyses the emigration and stay in the current country by demonstrating why respondents left Germany and what their living situation is like in their new country of residence. Chapter 3.3 then analyses possible intentions to return; namely whether and for what reasons the respondents consider returning to Germany. Finally, Chapter 4 identifies fields of action based on the findings to counteract unwanted emigration and promote return migration.

1.1 State of research

Research on the emigration of people from a particular geographical area has already been conducted from various scientific positions, each with a different methodological approach and taking diverse influencing factors into account. The empirical research literature can be divided into positive quantitative research, which uses statistical models and official statistics or panel surveys to identify the cause-effect relationships between specific socio-demographic and socio-economic characteristics and emigration behaviour. Differences and similarities in this behaviour can be identified, the probability of emigration calculated and possible motives deduced³. However, these deductions are based on assumptions. Thus no statement can be made about the actual reasons for emigration (Loschert/Komitowski 2024). What's more, such research projects cannot fully capture the complexity of modern migratory movements and decisions.

Another part of the research literature attempts to close this gap and therefore deals with individual motives and reasons for emigration and the connection with developments at the meso level (e.g. the role of social networks) as well as the macro level (e.g. political and social changes) as push or pull factors for a decision to emigrate. In most cases, both reasons for immigration and emigration are taken into account. Qualitative interviews and standardised surveys of the target group are used here. The advantage of direct surveys and interviews is that they can provide in-depth information on specific migration behaviour. This information is useful for explaining patterns of emigration and immigration identified by statistical analyses, understanding the relevant reasons or mechanisms, and thus enabling a more comprehensive picture of migration decisions. To date, there has only been limited research in Germany about the actual reasons for emigration. Research

² It is worth noting that this study did not explicitly define refugees as a central component of the target group or the research focus. The analysis primarily looks at those who immigrated to Germany for various reasons and then subsequently emigrated again, with an emphasis on voluntary migration decisions. The specific situation of refugees, who often migrate under different circumstances and with different legal frameworks, is not considered separately in this study. This distinction is based on the assumption that refugees' reasons for emigration and immigration greatly differ from those people who have migrated for other reasons unrelated to coercion or war.

³ Comparisons e.g. Nekby 2006; Constant/Massey 2003; Alscher/Kreienbrink 2014, p. 100; nBedhruendctth/Lgutezf2ü0h21r;tSuhanmdsusdidein/uKnttseairtia2n02d0e; Kruenhlenzkausper/Steinhardt 2012; Adda et al. 2022; Schiele 2021.

has also been predominantly limited to emigration – the phenomenon of return migration to Germany by people who have already emigrated is rarely the subject of research, however.

The actual reasons why immigrants leave Germany again have only been empirically researched to a limited extent. Even the largest German household survey, the Socio-Economic Panel, merely enquires about the intention to emigrate, but neglects peoples' precise motives. Some studies address this gap in research and data by asking immigrants about their migration trajectories, life goals and plans and motives to emigrate or their actual reasons for emigrating. Yet, as the selection and implementation of such surveys and interviews entails significant time and money, these studies are often limited to specific target groups (depending on origin, nationality, destination of emigration or age) and usually do not claim to be representative. A distinction also needs to be made between the ex-ante survey of emigration intentions and motives and the ex-post survey of reasons for emigration after emigration has actually taken place. As can be seen, most research projects enquire about the motives for emigration ex ante; i.e. at a time when people are still living in Germany. Owing to the difficulties in sampling people, surveys about the reasons for emigration conducted ex post, after emigration, are much less common and thus often limited to individual destination countries of emigration. A detailed discussion of the research literature on immigration and emigration processes based on direct surveys and interviews with immigrants and emigrants, can be found in Loschert/Komitowski 2024.

The project “Immigration from South-East Europe” (ZuSudo) (Schramm 2023) conducted standardised surveys of 600 EU nationals who migrated between Romania, Bulgaria and the Ruhr area, asking them about their migration trajectories and future migration wishes and plans. The main reasons for emigration to the country of origin are of a professional nature, followed by family reasons. The study also asked about in which areas of life migrants need support; the result showed that all language groups would most frequently like support in the areas of employment, education and language acquisition.

Based on the migration trajectories recorded, the study proposes four types of migration; three of which entail returning to the country of origin or onward migration to another country. This illustrates how emigration is usually an integral part of the migration process or even part of a more or less planned migration strategy, and should therefore not automatically be regarded solely as “failed immigration” or “failed integration”.

1.2 Research gap

The evaluation of the research literature (see Loschert/Komitowski 2024) clearly shows that surveys must consider factors at the micro, meso and macro level both in the

country of emigration and in the destination country of migration in order to conduct a holistic analysis of emigration processes and to offset the one-sidedness of national official statistics, which usually only analyse emigration conditions in the country of emigration. The research literature shows: migration is multi-causal and not linear; the migration process therefore does not often end with emigration from Germany. When asked about future migration intentions after emigrating from Germany, many of the respondents can imagine onward migration to another country or returning to Germany. Having said that, intentions for onward migration among those who emigrated have scarcely been systematically recorded to date.

The following gaps in research can be identified:

- Ex-post studies: There is a lack of studies that analyse the reasons for emigration after it has taken place. Most studies focus on intentions or hypothetical scenarios.
- Push and pull factors: There are a few studies that examine the reasons for emigration in Germany as a country of emigration (push factors) and in the destination country of emigration (pull factors).
- Multi-level analysis: Only a few studies examine emigration factors at the micro, meso and macro level.
- Differentiated analysis of onward migration and return aspects: Detailed analyses of the wishes, considerations and needs for onward migration or return after emigration are rare.

At this point, we need better data and further research projects that differentiate between various emigration processes and investigate migrants' intentions and needs to return. This can be used to develop labour market and integration policy measures and instruments, for example. The survey described below and the survey design of this study aim to contribute towards closing these research gaps and creating a more solid basis for the development of effective policy measures.

2.

Survey design and sample

The methodological core of the study is a standardised, non-representative online survey of emigrants, which was disseminated via social media using various strategies. This method was chosen due to the specific challenges of recording a target group that is no longer registered in Germany and is scattered across various countries. Traditional survey methods reach their limits with this group of people. Our key starting point for accessing the target group was therefore addressing them via social media channels. This means that the selection of study participants is largely uncontrolled, and the distribution of relevant characteristics in the sample does not correspond to the distribution among the population of emigrants. This gives rise to a non-representative sample for the entire target group (Cohen/Arieli 2011).

Samples obtained via social media have an increased risk of distortion (bias), which can limit the generalisability of the results. One main reason for this is self-selection: The participants decide themselves whether they want to take part in the survey instead of being randomly selected. This can lead to the participation of those who have an especially strong interest in the topic, for instance due to a strong affinity with or aversion to Germany. What's more, social media users often do not reflect the entire population. There are often differences in usage between various age groups, socio-economic strata, and geographical regions, which may result in a demographic bias. The composition of the user base may also greatly differ between different social media platforms. In some countries, there are also government constraints or even bans on certain social media platforms, which may make it difficult or impossible to reach potential participants in these regions. Despite these challenges, the survey affords valuable insights into the situation of people who have left Germany. It provides important starting points and food for thought, even if the results have to be interpreted with caution.

2.1 Survey design

In order to reach a broad participant base of both EU and third-country nationals from different regions of origin, the survey and the accompanying address and advertising texts were translated into ten languages: German, English, Spanish, Arabic, Russian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Polish, Turkish, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian.

2.1.1 Questionnaire development

The study is based on a standardised online survey (Web-Survey) using a questionnaire that mainly contains closed questions.

The development of the questionnaire was preceded by an exploratory analysis aimed at gaining a more in-depth understanding of the research field and identifying potential questions and response options. The exploratory analysis comprised an examination of the state of research and the identification of research gaps, an analysis of digital groups and communities on social media, which offered insights into current discussions, trends, and opinions among immigrants and emigrants, and a subsequent discussion of the results and the questionnaire in focus group interviews with immigrants and returnees. The questionnaire was developed taking into account the existing state of research and the results of the explorative analysis.

At first, the questionnaire asks participants whether they have lived in Germany in the past but were not born there, and whether they currently live in another country in order to check whether they correspond to the desired target group. In addition to the socio-demographic data of the respondents, the rest of the questionnaire covers the phases of immigration, emigration, and return or onward migration. As the respondents were no longer living in Germany at the time of the survey, the questionnaire combines prospective, retrospective questions and questions on the status quo (see Table 3 in the appendix). In order to carry out a holistic analysis of immigration, emigration, and return migration processes, the survey on migration motives also includes factors at the micro, meso, and macro level both in the country of emigration and the destination country of migration.

When it comes to asking about the reasons for immigration and emigration, we are also guided by items from other surveys that have been repeatedly tested (e.g. The SOEP migration sample). Questions pertaining to future migration plans (i.e. prospective questions) are asked using several complementary questions. Future migration efforts are a multi-dimensional and elusive phenomenon that can best be assessed using several variables. This involves a combination of questions on a) preferences/wishes, b) considerations/reflections and c) probabilities/expectations (compare the explanations in Chapter 3.3).

A pre-test was carried out at first in order to test the survey instrument that was developed using a software platform. The goal of this pre-test was to evaluate the comprehensibility, user-friendliness and practicability of the questionnaire. Following completion of the pre-test, native speakers translated the questionnaires into nine language using the dual control principle in each case. A further pre-test was then conducted in the respective language versions to ensure the quality and comprehensibility of the translations.

The survey period extended from 3 July 2024 to 27 October 2024.

2.1.2 Field access via social media

The survey's organisational preparation placed an emphasis on field access, in particular the development of a dissemination strategy to meet the challenge that the target group is located abroad and speaks different (native) languages. The following three strategies were selected for field access via social media.

- Dissemination via social media groups: During the survey period, the survey link was shared in various groups on Facebook, Telegram and LinkedIn, in which certain communities of the target group frequently exchange information in larger groups. Group members are made aware of the survey through regular postings in the respective community languages and targeted communication by the group moderators. The communication and sharepics were also translated into the nine main languages of the survey (without illustration).
- Advertising on social media: A further strategy to draw the target group's attention to the survey on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, was targeting. This is target-group specific online advertising that serves to make the desired target group aware of the survey and motivate them to participate. Targeting was originally used by advertisers to define a specific target group for their products or services based on certain characteristics such as age, gender, place of resi-

dence or interests. However, this method can also be used to reach migrant online communities. A detailed guide describing how the principle of targeting can be applied to reach migrants is available in the publication by Surtormina et al (2023). Targeted adverts were placed on Facebook and Instagram, specifically aimed at people abroad who have an interest in Germany and have already lived here.

- Distribution and support via partners and multipliers: Representatives of migration advice centres and migrant organisations as well as individuals who are well connected with migrant communities via social media, were asked to help disseminate the survey link. Accordingly, they shared the survey on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook and LinkedIn, among others.

2.2 Description of the sample

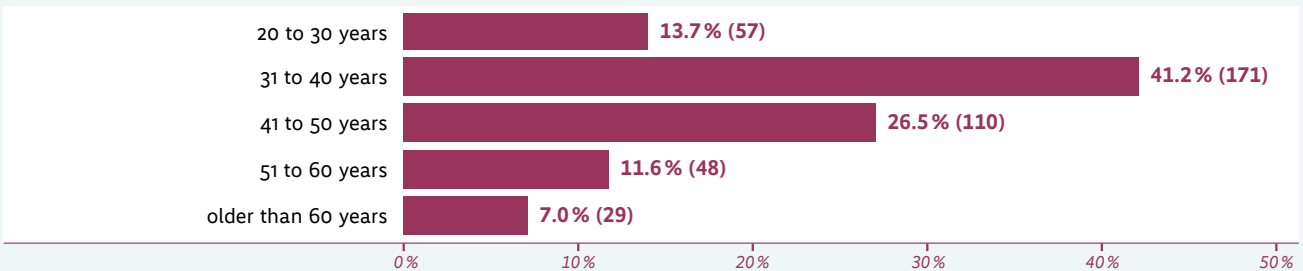
The survey outlined above was conducted between 3 July 2024 and 27 October 2024. A total of 416 people completed the survey. Due to the sampling procedure explained in Chapter 2.1, this is not a representative sample. The sample description is also important because it makes it possible to identify potential biases that could arise due to the nature of the sample. For that reason, this section presents the key socio-demographic characteristics of the sample before the results of the survey are analysed and discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

The majority of respondents are aged between 31 and 40 (41.2 percent), followed by those aged 41 to 50 (26.5 percent). Around one eighth are aged 20 to 30 (13.7 percent) and 51 to 60 (11.6 percent). Only a few of the respondents are 61 years or older (seven percent) (see Figure 1).

The gender of respondents is divided almost evenly between female (44.6 percent) and male (55.4 percent) (without illustration). The slight surplus of male respondents is primarily the result of a clear male majority among Turkish and Indian participants. Most of the respondents among

Age

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

Fig. 1

the Serbs, Italians and Pakistanis are also men, but the proportion of the total population is smaller in each case, which is why its representativeness cannot be assumed here. At the same time, there is a clear majority of women among the French (85.7 percent) and Bulgarian (64.3 percent) respondents (without illustration). These surpluses of male and female respondents do not correspond to the figures in official statistics on the foreign population, although in the case of India or Turkey, for instance, there are trends in the respective direction (Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) 2024a).

What is striking in our sample is that the vast majority of respondents have a university degree (85.4 percent) (see Figure 2). Just under half stated a Master's degree as their highest educational qualification. Only 29.1 percent of respondents obtained their highest degree in Germany (without illustration). These academic backgrounds should definitely be taken into account when interpreting the results. On the one hand, we can assume that people with a higher educational attainment tend to pursue different professional activities than those with a lower education. This could positively influence their perception and evaluation of working conditions overall and lead to a less critical assessment of certain problem areas. On the other hand, more highly educated people often have better job opportunities, career prospects and entry regulations in other countries. This potentially makes it easier for them to decide to emigrate to another country if the working or living conditions in Germany do not meet their expectations. The high proportion of respondents with an academic background could therefore create a distortion, as other educational groups and their specific perspectives might be under-represented. This should be taken into account when interpreting the results. It is therefore important to always consider statements on the assessment of working and living conditions in the context of this specific composition of the sample and to reflect on possible limitations regarding transferability to other migration groups.

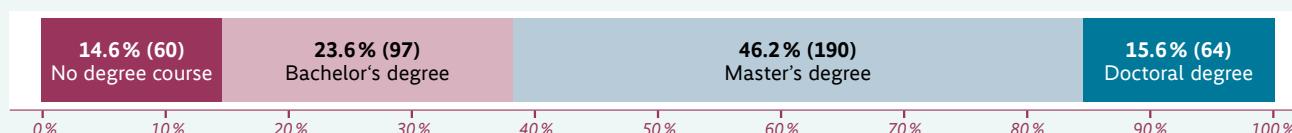
At 67.4 percent, the majority of respondents come from Europe (EU and non-EU), of which around 40 percent are from non-EU countries and around a third each from EU-11⁴ and EU-15 countries⁵. Around one eighth of respondents come from South and Central America, as well as Asia and Oceania. Added to this are around seven percent of respondents from North Africa and the Middle East and a small number of respondents from North America and sub-Saharan Africa (see Figure 3).

Almost every fifth (19.1 percent) of respondents stated Turkey as their country of origin, making this group by far the largest in the sample (see Figure 4). This is hardly surprising because people of Turkish origin also represent the largest group of people living in Germany without German citizenship (Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) 2023), and thus reflects the historical and current importance of Turkey as a country of origin for immigration to Germany. Official statistics show that, for instance, Turkey has the highest immigration and emigration rates among countries outside the EU. Within the EU, on the other hand, Romania, followed by Poland and Bulgaria, are the countries that record the highest levels of immigration and emigration (Loschert/Komitowski 2024). Nevertheless, respondents from Poland and Romania only make up a small proportion of the population of the survey sample. This suggests that the uneven distribution of countries of origin in the sample is also due to the accessibility of the target group. Many respondents were approached via social media campaigns, targeted advertising or networks, with varying levels of success in the different countries (see Chapter 2.1.2).

Degree

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets

Fig. 2



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

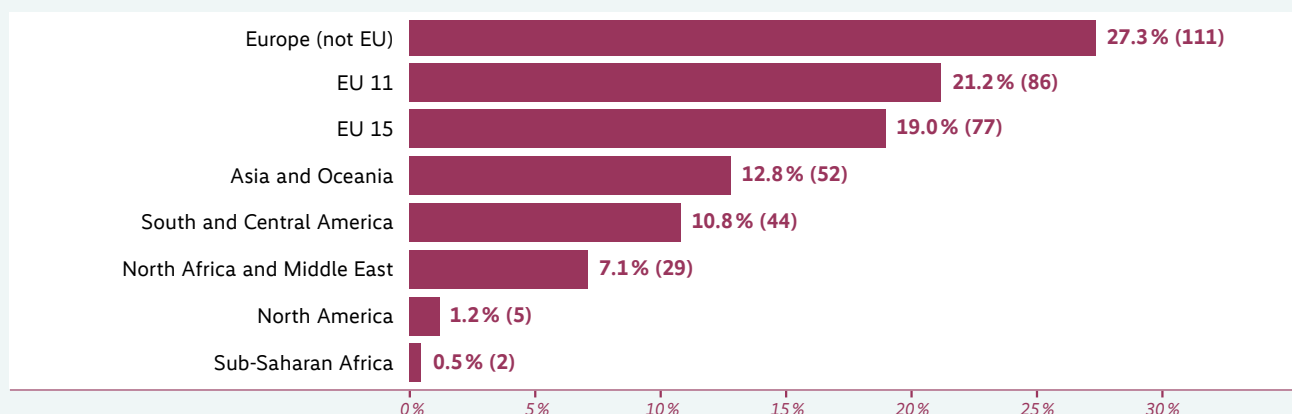
⁴ EU 11 refers to the countries that joined the European Union between 2004 and 2013 in the course of its enlargement in Central and Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean region: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia.

⁵ EU 15 refers to the 15 member states that existed between 1995 and 2004: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

Fig. 3

Regions of origin*

grouped according to regions, data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



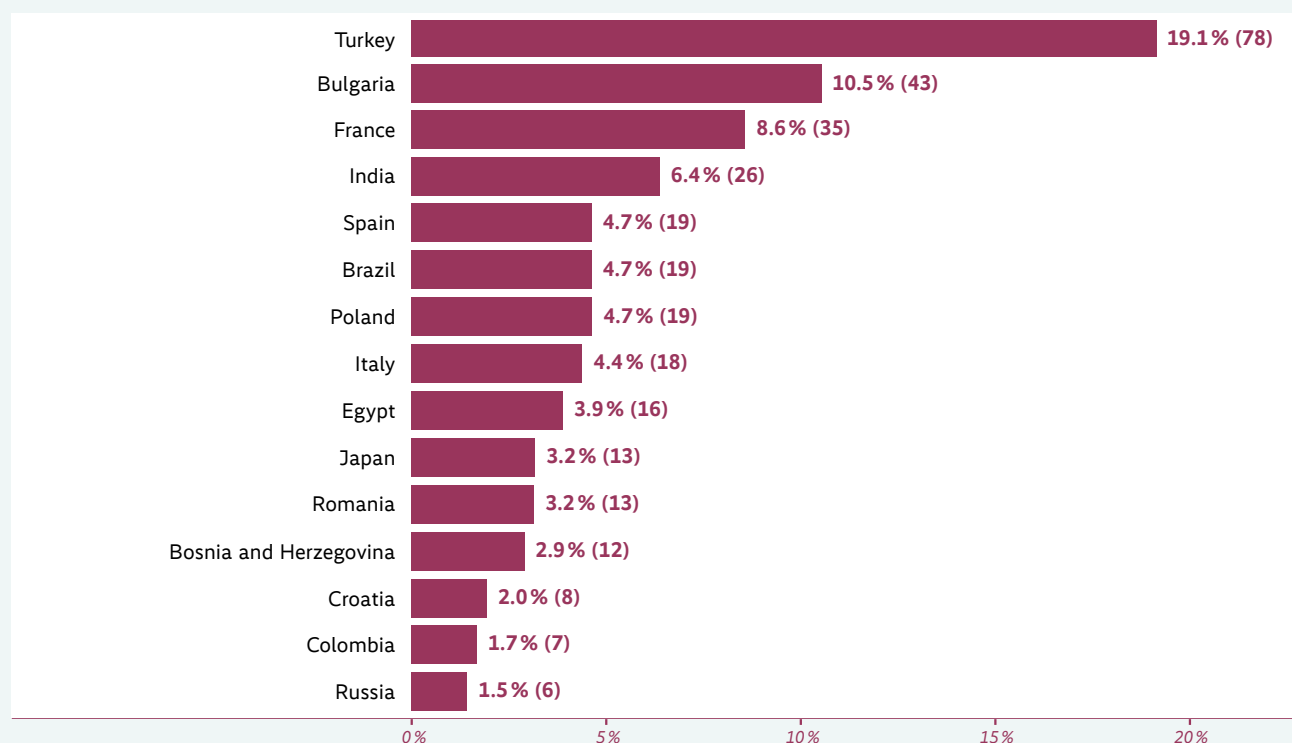
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "Which country would you describe as your country of origin?"

Fig. 4

Most common countries of origin*

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



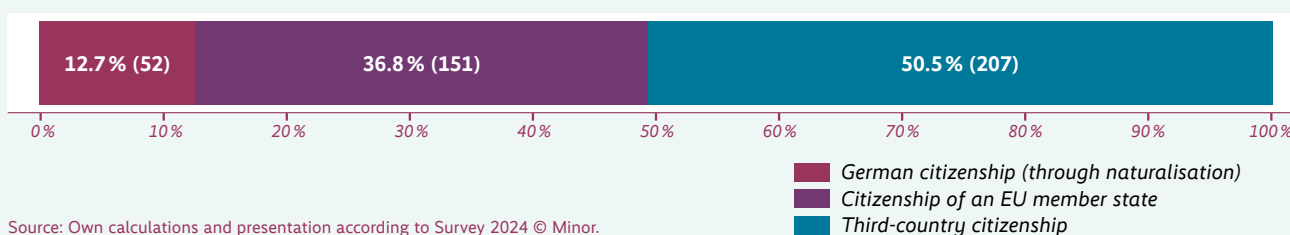
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "Which country would you describe as your country of origin?"

citizenship

Fig. 5

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Around half of respondents (50.5 percent) has citizenship in a third country. In addition, 36.8 percent have citizenship of another EU member state. Only a small proportion of respondents (12.7 percent) obtained German citizenship through naturalisation (see Figure 5).

Most of the respondents (68.5 percent) were living in their country of origin at the time of the survey, whereas 31.5 percent were living in another country (third country) (without illustration).

At over 60 percent, the absolute majority of respondents have emigrated in the past five years (2020-2024) (see Figure 6). It is particularly striking that 18.4 percent of respondents only emigrated in 2024, the year of the survey. Although emigration figures in Germany have actually increased (2000: 674,038 emigrations, 2023: 1,269,545 emigrations – cf. Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) 2024c), it is more likely that the high proportion of recent emigrants in the sample is due to methodological factors: Those who only recently emigrated may be more interested in sharing their experiences, as the memory of their motivations and challenges is still fresh. They therefore feel more encouraged to take part in the survey. What is more, connections and networks to Germany may still be active and well maintained via social media in order to stay in touch with family, friends or professional networks. Accordingly, this group of emigrants is also easier to reach for the survey via social media (cf. Chapter 2 on bias and, in particular, self-selection in non-representative samples).

Among those surveyed for this study, the majority (44.6 percent) had lived in Germany for more than five years, just over a quarter (27.1 percent) between two and five years

and around 14 percent for less than one year (see Figure 7). Data from immigration statistics for EU and third-country nationals who emigrated in 2022 suggest that around one quarter of those who emigrated stayed in Germany for less than a year. Some 32 percent had been in Germany for more than five years prior to their emigration in 2022 (cf. Figure 5 in Loschert/Komitowski 2024: 11). Our survey does not only look at emigration behaviour in 2022, however, the comparison with official statistics indicates that our survey tended to include more people who have stayed in Germany for longer periods of time. Their comparatively higher proportion could be related to the specific recruitment strategy of the study. Addressing people via social networks, groups and multipliers on social media presumably mainly reaches people who have more stable or extensive networks in Germany – a fact that is particularly true for those who have spent longer in the country.

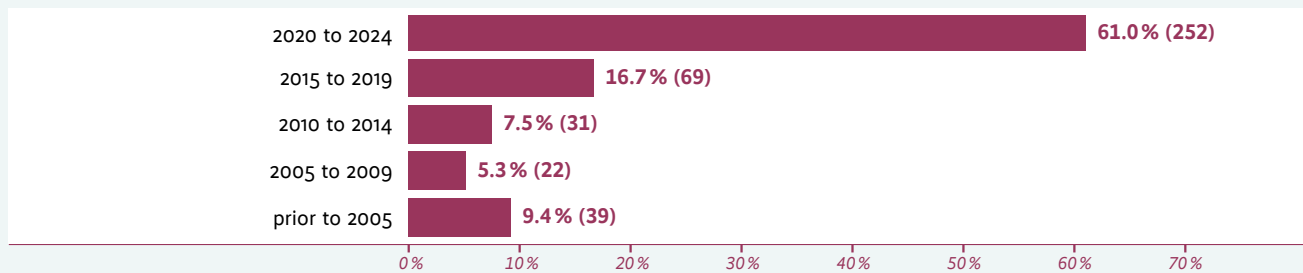
More than two thirds (70.6 percent) of respondents were employed during their stay in Germany, while only 8.4 percent were self-employed. A further 21 percent had no work experience in Germany (see Figure 8).

When asked what the last main occupation in Germany was prior to emigrating, the vast majority of respondents (62 percent) stated that they had been in permanent employment before emigrating. Some 22 percent were studying at university, spending time abroad as an au pair, as part of work & travel or volunteering or were in school or vocational training. Just under seven percent were self-employed, while 5.8 percent were unemployed. For 3.2 percent, the last main occupation in Germany was housework or caring for children or other relatives (see Figure 9).

Date of emigration*

Fig. 6

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



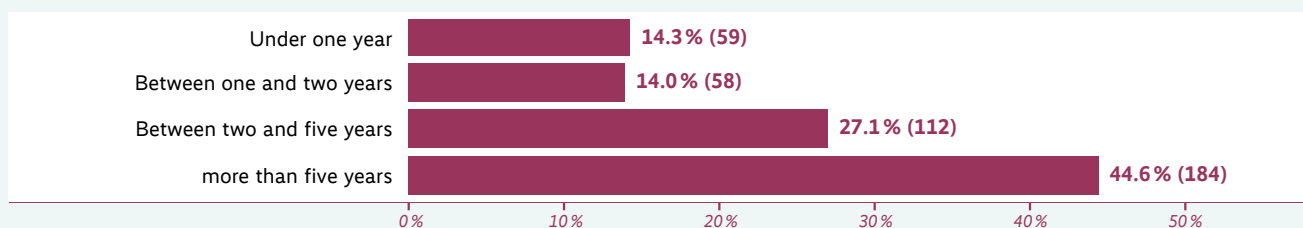
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "When did you (most recently) emigrate from Germany?"

Duration of stay in Germany*

Fig. 7

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



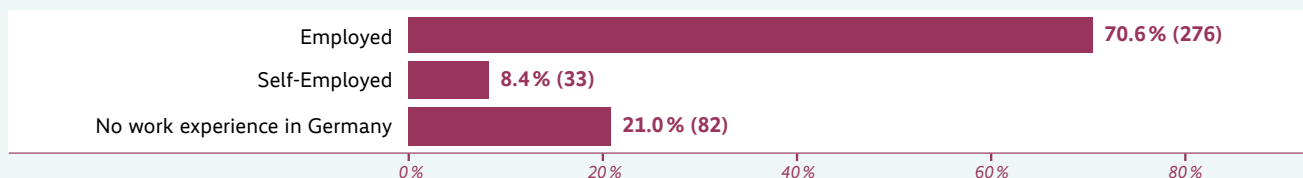
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "How long was your last stay in Germany?"

Employment in Germany*

Fig. 8

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



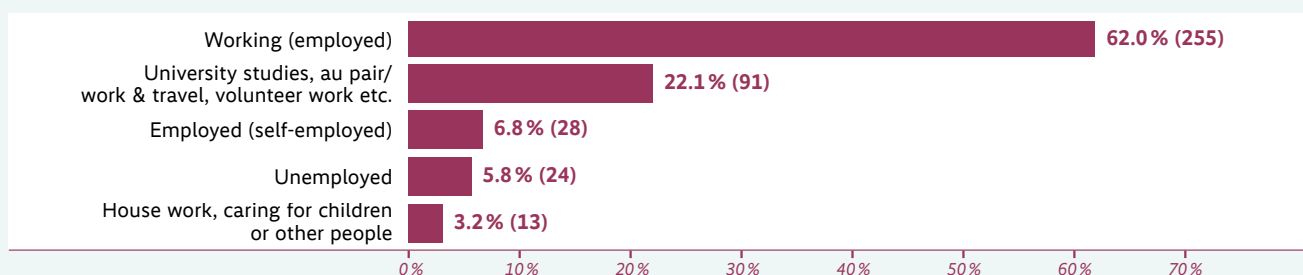
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: „Have you worked in Germany?“, with the possible answers: "1) No; 2) Yes, I was self-employed; 3) Yes, I was employed".

Last main occupation in Germany*

Fig. 9

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "What was your last main occupation in Germany?"

3.

Results of the study

The focus of the survey analysed here is on the reasons for emigration and emigrants' thoughts about returning. However, these aspects must be considered and interpreted in connection with the original reasons for immigration, as empirical research suggests that reasons for immigration and emigration are often closely linked and complement each other (Boockmann et al. 2022). Immigration to Germany, the decision to emigrate and a possible onward or return migration are individual migration steps that are often embedded in a longer migration process or a more or less planned migration strategy. For instance, emigration may have already been planned at the time of immigration and logically result from it, such as in the case of immigration for an Erasmus programme, after which emigration takes place (Krisjane et al. 2018).

At the same time, people often adapt their plans to changed circumstances: they stay longer than initially intended or leave a country earlier than planned if unforeseen events occur – for example, financial difficulties, experiences of discrimination, the care needs of a parent or a longing for their family. This means that the decision to leave a country is often linked to factors that led to the original immigration – but this does not necessarily have to be the case. The same applies to return migration following emigration. In order to do justice to these complex interdependencies, the questionnaire covers all phases of the migration process. Respondents were therefore also asked about the reason for their original immigration to Germany and the factors that spoke in favour of Germany at the time. This makes it easier to understand and interpret interactions and developments.

In the following, the results of the survey are presented chronologically according to the various phases of migration decisions. Here, each phase is deliberately considered separately to enable a comprehensive understanding of the migration processes. Each migration decision – from immigration to emigration right through to a possible return or onward migration – represents an independent step that is, however, linked to previous or subsequent decisions. What's more, questions on the situation and satisfaction of respondents in the respective countries of residence between the individual migration phases are taken into account. This perspective is important to understand

how living conditions and experiences in a country can impact on future migration decisions.

Specifically, the presentation of the results is broken down as follows:

- At first, the decision to immigrate to Germany and the situation of migrants during their stay in Germany are explained (see Chapter 3.1).
- The reasons for emigration and the living situation in the destination country of emigration or in the current country of residence are then presented (see Chapter 3.2).
- Finally, the respondents' motives for return or onward migration are addressed (Phase 5).

This structured breakdown makes it possible to examine different phases of the migration process in detail and to visualise potential interactions between the decisions. It also enables a reconstruction of the chronological sequence of migration steps and to better understand the underlying motives, circumstances, and experiences.

3.1 Immigration to and residence in Germany

The first major block of questions in the survey deals with the respondents' original decision to immigrate and the situation during their stay in Germany. The following will at first analyse the results in relation to the original reason for immigration and the reasons for choosing Germany as a destination country. Then the respondents' employment situation and their satisfaction with various areas of life is discussed.

3.1.1 Reason for immigration and factors

The survey distinguishes between the main reason for immigration to Germany (e.g. job offer, job search, degree course) and the reasons for choosing Germany as a destination country, as they shed light on different aspects of the migration decision:

- The main reason shows the immediate motivation for the decision to leave their country of residence,
- e.g. the desire to study abroad, a better-paid job. However, this reason does not explain why a specific country (in this case Germany) was chosen as the destination to fulfil this purpose.

→ The choice of Germany as a destination country is often determined by additional factors, such as geographical proximity to their own country of origin, the presence of social networks such as family or friends, better residence law conditions or visa requirements or economic and professional prospects in the country. Those who emigrate to look for a job, for instance, could choose between several countries, but they opt for one that best suits their individual preferences or conditions.⁶

The distinction between the main reason and the specific motives for choosing a particular country affords a differentiated perspective on complex decision-making processes.

Around three-quarters of respondents had resided in their country of origin prior to immigrating to Germany. One quarter came to Germany from another country to Germany (without illustration). Most respondents cite work-related reasons as the main reason for their immigration: 29.3 percent came to Germany because of a specific job offer, 5.8 percent to look for a job. Just under one third of respondents came for a degree course, training or an internship. This is hardly surprising in light of the large proportion of academics among the respondents (see Figure 2). This is followed by personal reasons such as the desire for personal change (10.6 percent) or family motives (10.3 percent). Only three percent of respondents indicated flight as the main reason for immigration and seven percent none of the options (see Figure 10).

If we differentiate the main reason for immigration according to region of origin, it is clear that respondents from Asia and Oceania (60.8 percent) and South and Central America (61.9 percent) in particular came to Germany for a degree course, apprenticeship or internship. By contrast, a job offer is the main reason for immigration among people from North Africa and the Middle East (55.2 percent) and from the EU-11 countries (38.4 percent). The desire for personal change as a reason for immigration is more prevalent among people from the EU-15 countries than other regions of origin (see Figure 11).⁷ One explanation could be that, due to the better economic and social stability in their countries of origin, people from the EU-15 countries immigrate more out of a desire for personal change and self-realisation than those from other regions, in which economic motives dominate.

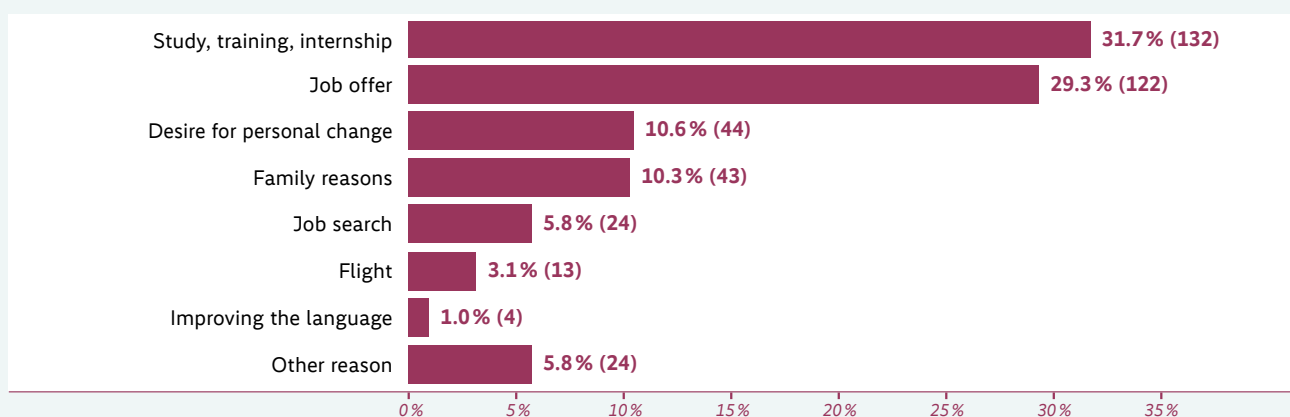
Professional and economic factors in particular speak in favour of Germany

When asked about the reasons in favour of Germany as a destination country of immigration, most respondents cite the good quality of life and good living standard in Germany (51.7 percent). However, there is a clear predominance of professional and economic factors,⁸ such as good working conditions or a good income (44.5 percent), good prospects of finding work (34.9 percent) or good career opportunities (33.9 percent). Social security aspects also play an important role for the respondents: This includes Germany's highly

*Main reason for immigration**

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets

Fig. 10



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "What was the main reason for your decision to leave this country and move to Germany?"

⁶ In particular, the focus group of the explorative analysis (see Chapter 5.2 in the annex) revealed that some of the respondents had specific reasons for migrating (e.g. plans to pursue a degree course abroad). However, the decision to ultimately realise this in Germany was often influenced by chance – for example, they obtained a scholarship for Germany, but not for other countries. This also suggests that migration to Germany was not always an expression of free choice.

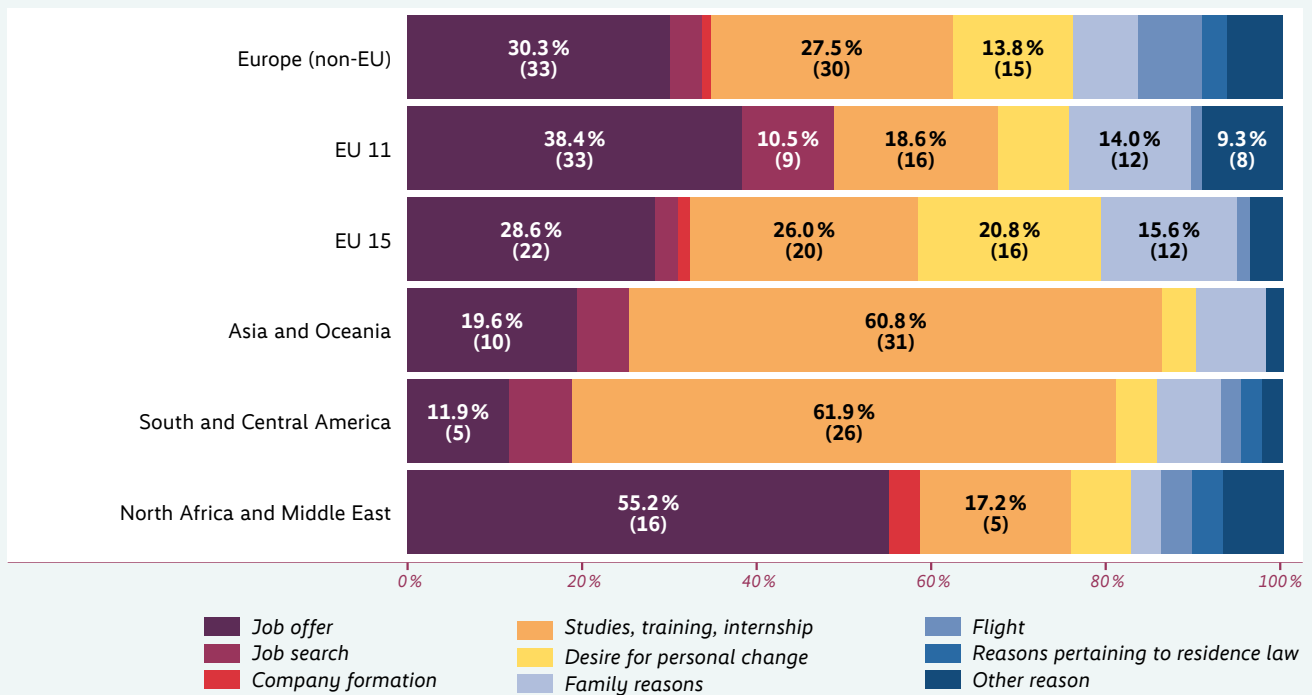
⁷ This can be viewed in the context of the core-periphery model, which distinguishes prosperous core regions from economically weaker peripheral regions. While migration from peripheral regions is more often caused by economic necessities or a lack of prospects in the country of origin, the greater economic stability in the core countries affords more scope for a free and individual decision to migrate, which is frequently guided by personal development goals. This is also reflected in the results of Krisjane et al. (2018: 9), according to which young EU nationals from the new member states are more strongly driven by economic motives than young people from the old member states.

⁸ The results of our survey confirm the findings of the IAW and SOKO survey (Boockmann et al. 2022: 46), which also emphasise professional and financial motives as the key reasons, followed by training and higher education.

Main reason for immigration by region of origin*

Fig. 11

Differentiation according to region of origin, data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "What was the main reason for your decision to leave this country and move to Germany?"

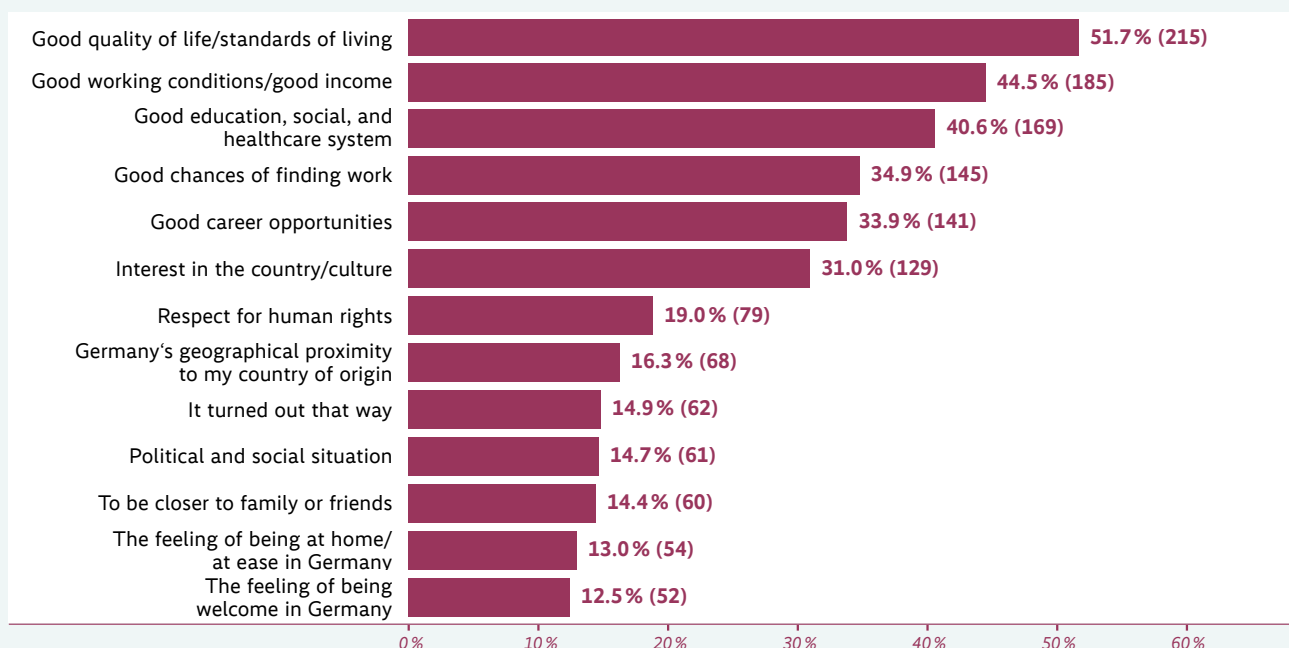
rated education, social and healthcare system (40.6 percent). Only a few people cited social or emotional ties as a reason for immigrating to Germany: Merely 14.4 percent cite proximity to family or friends as a reason, whereas 13.0 percent state that they feel at home or at ease in Germany, and 12.5 percent said they felt welcome. What's more, some respondents state personal interests as a motivation, such as an interest in the country and culture (31.0 percent) or geographical proximity to their country of origin (16.3 percent) (see Figure 12).

Overall, our sample shows that professional and training-related reasons were the main reasons for immigration. Above all, the attractive living, working and educational conditions were the decisive factors in choosing Germany as their destination. Psychosocial reasons, such as a feeling of being at ease or welcome in Germany, played hardly any role, however.

Immigration factors (pull factors) in Germany*

Fig. 12

Multiple selections possible, figures in percent, absolute figures in parentheses



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "What were your reasons for moving to Germany in particular?"

3.1.2 Assessment of the situation in Germany

Arriving in a new country is often associated with a number of obstacles. Even if the decision to immigrate was made consciously, everyday life quickly reveals how the transition to a new social and professional environment does not always run smoothly. Language barriers, cultural differences, or practical issues such as finding accommodation and employment can make the first steps difficult and may be part of the reason for subsequent emigration. The survey illustrates the challenges that emigrants experienced in Germany.

Social factors and finding accommodation as key challenges upon arrival

The biggest hurdle for many respondents during their stay in Germany was establishing a circle of friends, particularly with German-speaking people – some 41 percent perceived this as particularly challenging. In addition, around 20 percent state that they have had difficulties making new social contacts, regardless of the language. Physical distance from family (20.9 percent) and friends (16.2 percent) is also cited as a challenge that further exacerbates perceived social isolation. Another particularly critical point is finding

accommodation: 33.8 percent of respondents found it to be extremely difficult. The integration of children in schools or daycare is viewed as a major challenge by 29.2 percent,⁹ while one quarter of respondents perceived this as problem-free. Furthermore, the entry into working life presented some difficulties: 18.5 percent found their own job search to be very challenging, while 24.2 percent reported this for their partners. On the whole, however, more people stated that they see no or few challenges in this. The respondents rated their residence permit status as the least challenging:¹⁰ 37.4 percent felt it was not challenging at all and a further 24.1 percent found it only slightly challenging. An explanation for this is the reason for immigration of the respondents reached: The majority came to Germany for a degree course, apprenticeship, an internship or a job offer. In all these cases, it can be assumed that they had an appropriate visa.

Experiences with discrimination are mentioned least frequently as a challenge among the possible response options – nevertheless, 30 percent of respondents consider it to be a (very) big challenge. The evaluations in Chapter 3 illustrate the fact that such experiences also influence the decision to emigrate. In order to understand whether and

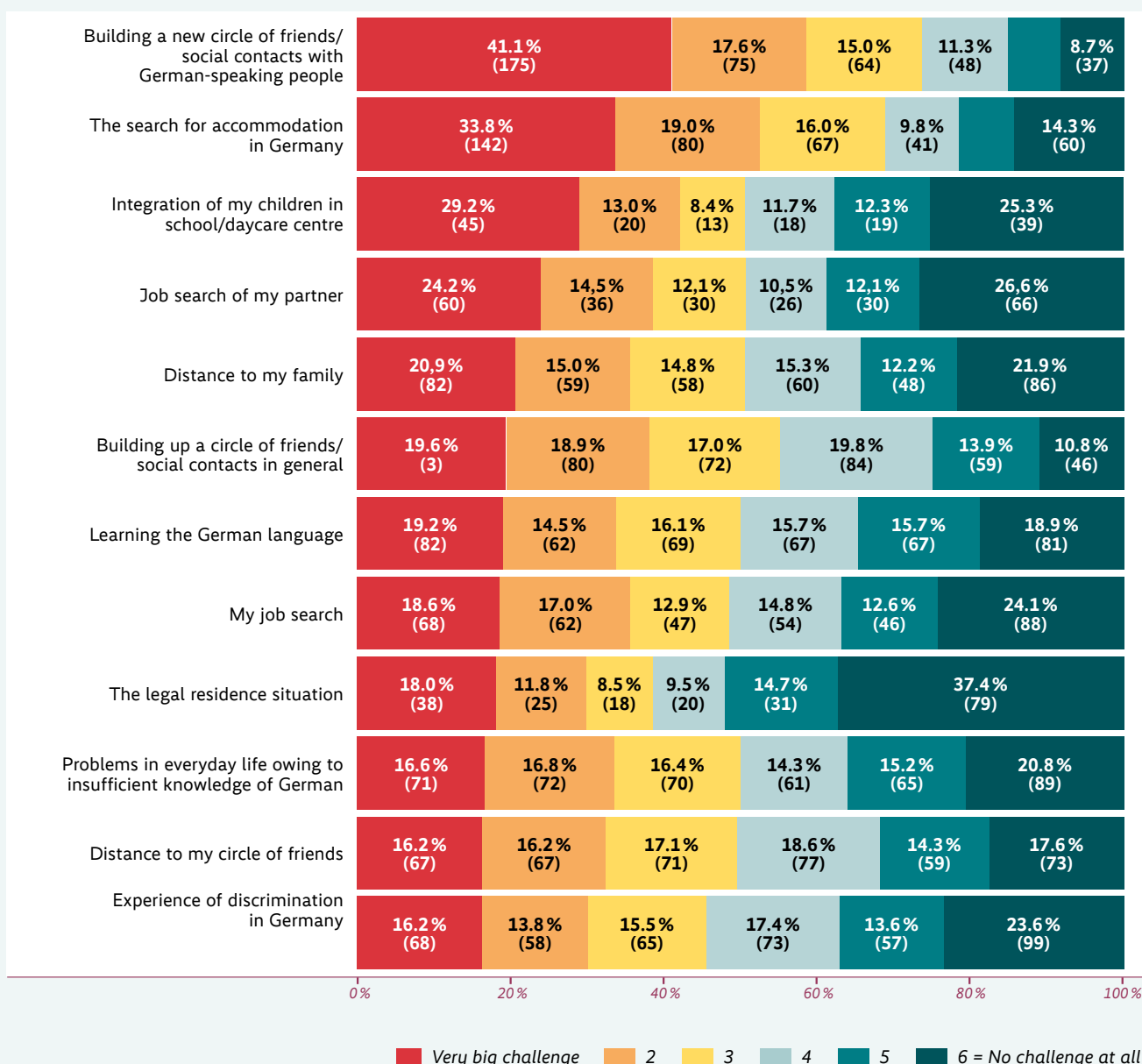
⁹ This question was only posed to people who had stated that they had children.

¹⁰ This question was only showed to people who had indicated that they were not a national of an EU member state.

Challenges in Germany*

Fig. 13

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to question: "To what extent have the following aspects made your time in Germany challenging?"

how these challenges also impact quality of life in the long term, it is worth taking a look at the respondents' satisfaction with various areas of life in Germany. These assessments can be used to explain both emigration and in the context of potential return migration, enabling conclusions to be drawn about any necessary changes to the framework conditions for a successful integration policy.

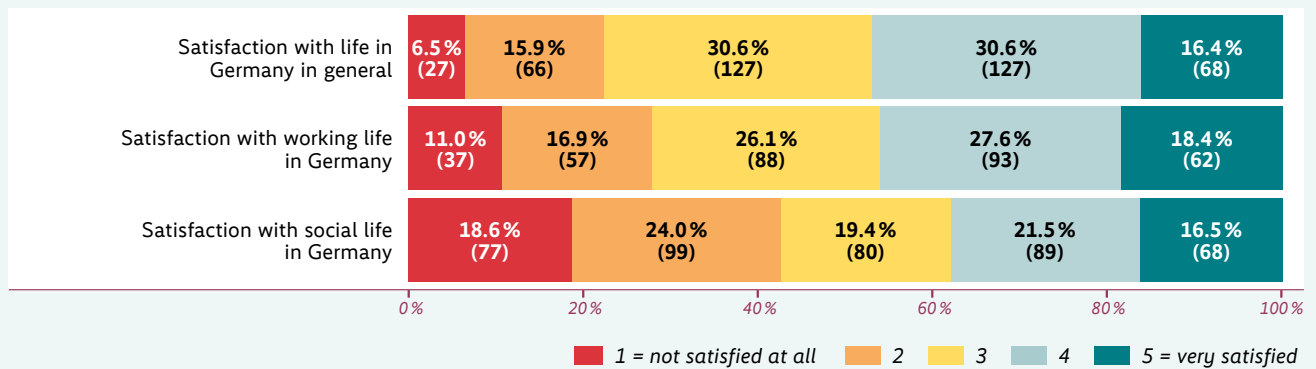
Emigrants express particularly high levels of dissatisfaction with social life in Germany

Despite high levels of overall satisfaction, a closer look reveals dissatisfaction in the area of social life in particular: 42.6 percent of respondents stated that they were not (at all) satisfied during their stay in Germany. Nevertheless, 38 percent were (very) satisfied with their social life in Germany. Social life in Germany was rated particularly negatively by people from the new EU member states. They awarded an average rating of 2.3. People from the original EU member states with an average rating of 3.3 (without illustration).

Satisfaction with life in Germany*

Fig. 14

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the questions: "Overall, how satisfied were you with your life in Germany at the time?", "How satisfied were you with your working life at the time?" and "How satisfied were you with your social life at the time?".

Satisfaction with working life in Germany is somewhat higher in our survey: 46 percent were (very) satisfied with their working life, while 27.9 percent were not (at all) satisfied (Figure 14). Respondents from North Africa and the Middle East were the least satisfied with their working life (2.6), followed by people from the new EU member states (2.7). People from South and Central America (3.5) and the original EU member states (3.4) were the most satisfied.

Overall, it is clear that social factors play a decisive role in the evaluation of a stay in Germany. Establishing social contacts – especially with German-speaking people – is cited as a key challenge upon arrival. The fact that this difficulty was often not overcome is reflected in the fact that social life in Germany was perceived by many as very unsatisfactory. The following chapter shows how this pattern also continues with the reasons for emigration.

3.2 Emigration from Germany

The second large block of questions from the standardised survey focuses on respondents' decision to leave Germany again. Given that the participants were already living in another country at the time of the survey, questions on the decision to emigrate were posed and answered retrospectively. By contrast, questions on the current situation in the country of residence (see Chapter 3.2.2) relate to the present at the time of the survey – they are neither retrospective nor prospective.

Almost two-thirds of respondents return to their country of origin

Most of the respondents had emigrated to their country of origin (64.9 percent), while just over one third of people emigrated to another country (35.1 percent) (see Figure 15). The most important countries of destination for people who did not emigrate to their country of origin are Switzerland, the UK, Spain and Austria (without illustration).

If we also consider the distribution of people according to their main place of residence at the time of the survey, it becomes clear that of those who emigrated from Germany to a country other than their country of origin, 17.8 percent

now live in their country of origin again, while the majority still live in their respective country of residence (76.6 percent) and only 5.5 percent have emigrated to another third country. Only 4.1 percent of those who emigrated from Germany to their country of origin have left it again (see Figure 16).

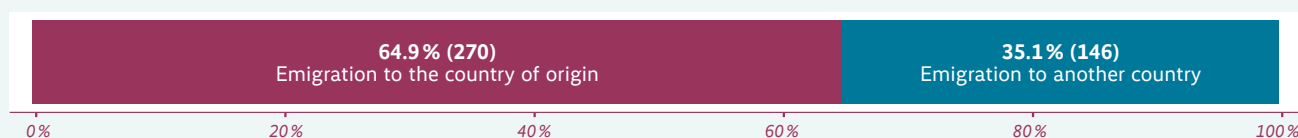
People with a partner in Germany stay longer and are more likely to migrate to a third country

In our survey, it was particularly those who had stayed in Germany for less than two years (75.2 percent) who emigrated to their country of origin, followed by those who had been in Germany for longer than five years (67.9 percent). Of those who stayed in Germany for between two and five years, around half have emigrated to a third country¹¹ (no illustration). If the partner had not lived in Germany, 73.1 percent of respondents emigrated to their country of origin, compared to 58.2 percent of respondents whose partner had lived in Germany (see Figure 17).¹² Respondents with partners in Germany were also far more likely to have stayed in Germany for more than two years (85.2 years) than those with partners outside Germany (51.9 percent).

Destination country of emigration from Germany*

Fig. 15

Destination country of emigration



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "Which country did you move to when you emigrated from Germany?"

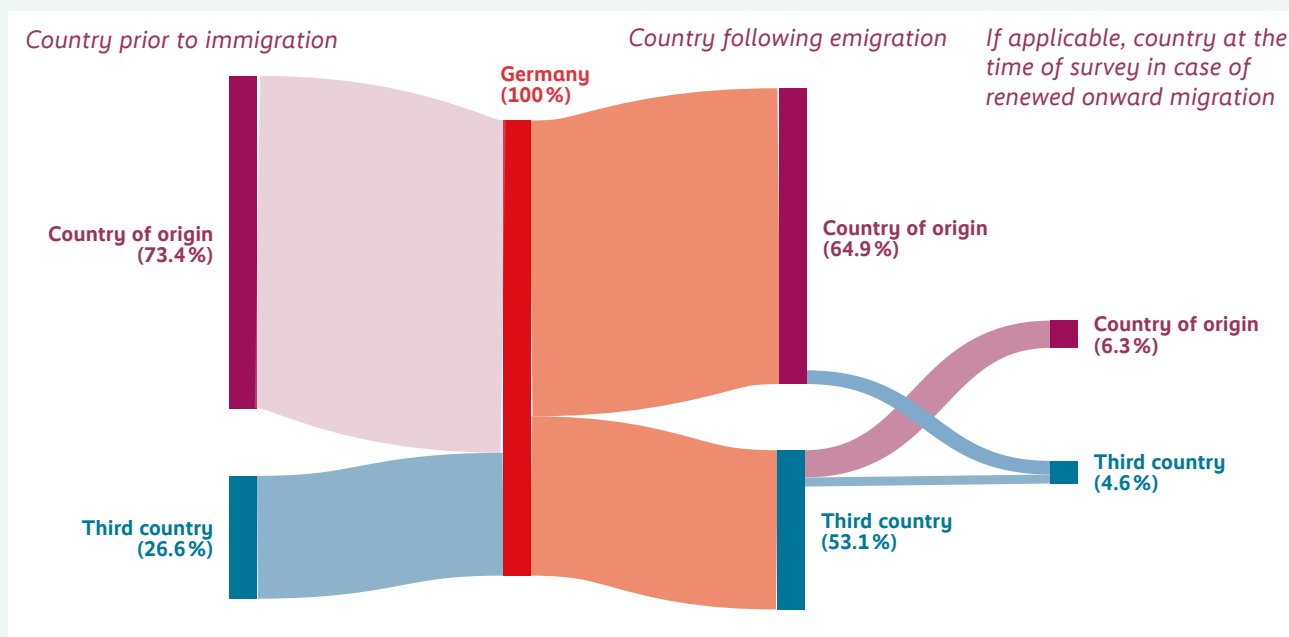
¹¹ These results could indicate that the duration of stay influences the decision to emigrate. Those who have been in Germany for less than two years may be more likely to return because they probably only saw Germany as a temporary place of residence for a degree course, work or personal experience, and planned to return to their country of origin from the outset. The high emigration rate to the country of origin among people who have been in Germany for longer than five years could, however, indicate that long-standing challenges – such as social isolation, job insecurity or difficulties with integration – ultimately lead to return. At the same time, life events such as starting a family or the desire for a closer social environment in their home country could also favour this decision. The group that had been in Germany for between two and five years and had more frequently moved on to a third country, may indicate a higher degree of mobility and flexibility. These people may have acquired qualifications or experience during their stay that has opened up new opportunities in other countries, or they use Germany as a springboard for career moves to third countries.

¹² The data indicates that for those whose partner did not live in Germany, the physical separation from their partner represented a strong incentive to return, which is why they more often migrated to their country of origin than a third country, compared to people with a partner in Germany. The latter more frequently migrated onward to a third country. In turn, this could suggest that joint experiences and social foundations in Germany promote openness to further international mobility rather than favouring a return to their country of origin.

Migration movement

Fig. 16

Data in percent (rounded) of total number of respondents



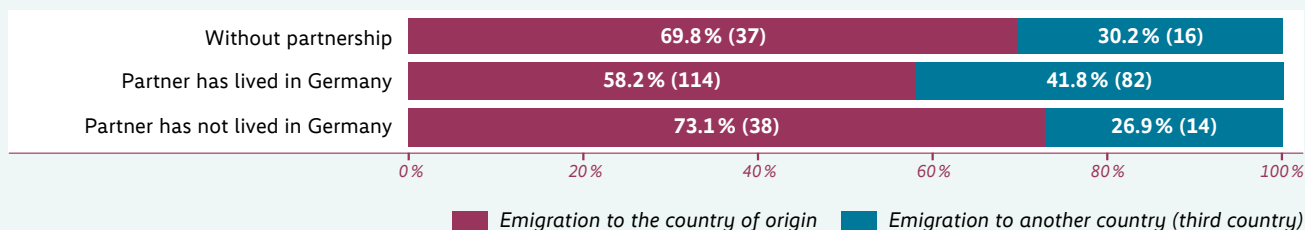
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* From left to right Immigration to Germany, emigration from Germany, onward migration.

Destination country of emigration by relationship status*

Fig. 17

differentiated according to region of origin, data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



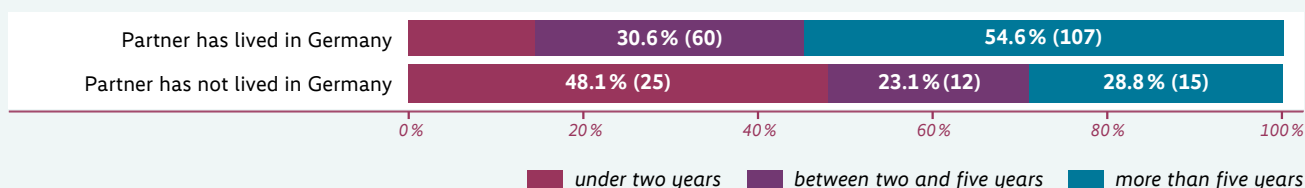
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "Which country did you move to when you emigrated from Germany?"

Duration of stay in Germany by place of residence of the partner

Fig. 18

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets

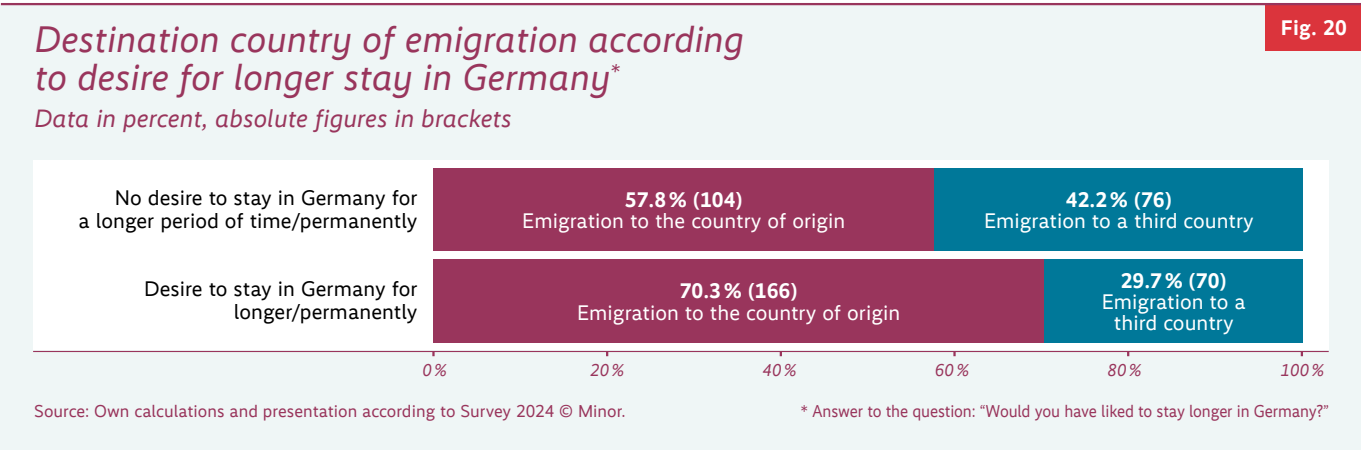
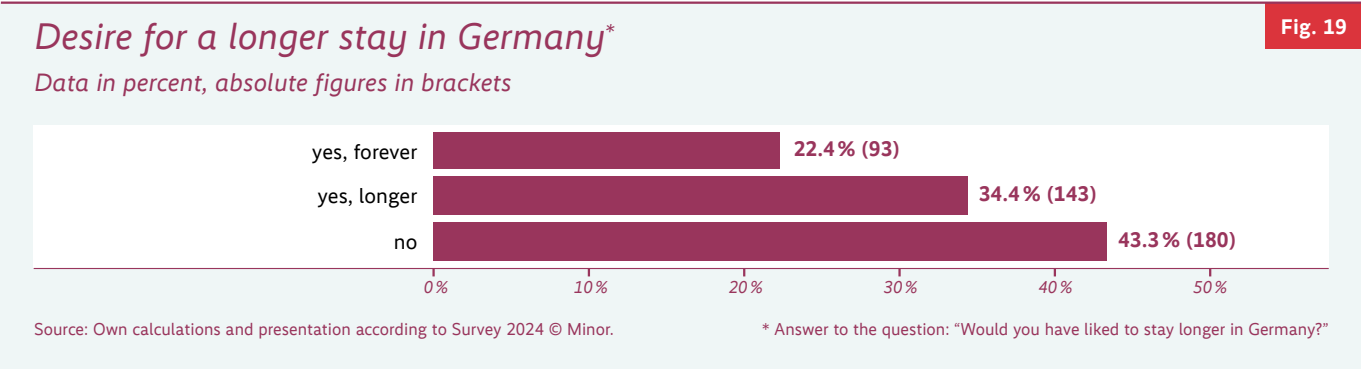


Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

The majority of emigrants would have liked to stay longer or permanently in Germany

More than half of respondents indicate that they would actually have liked to stay longer or permanently in Germany; 43.3 percent did not express this wish, however (see Figure 19). The question is also suitable as an indicator for the “voluntary nature” of emigration; for instance, the extent to which the decision to leave Germany was in line with the respondents’ personal wishes or was influenced by external factors such as the wishes of their partner, financial or residence permit constraints, or family necessities.

The proportion of involuntary emigrants is particularly high among those who cite residence permit requirements or job search as the main reason for emigrating from Germany (see Figure 23). Among those who would have liked to stay longer/permanently, some 70 percent emigrated to their country of origin, while only 57.8 percent of those who did not want to stay longer emigrated to their country of origin (Figure 20). This suggests that people who have not left Germany of their own accord (e.g. due to residence permit requirements, lack of job prospects) tend to return to their country of origin. This may be because returning to the country of origin is less complex in terms of finances and residence law.



The proportion of involuntary emigrants is particularly high among people who have lived in Germany for less than two years (Figure 21). This could be primarily due to uncertainty surrounding residence status and employment which often occurs in the first few years of residence and may force immigrants to leave the country, for instance because their residence permit is not extended or their financial livelihood cannot be sufficiently secured. The higher proportion of “voluntary” emigration for longer stays in Germany could be due to the fact that those affected have already established a more stable life in the country and come under less pressure to emigrate from external economic or legal constraints. Instead, emigration is more likely to be deliberate and weighed up, meaning it is more in line with the actual wishes of the emigrants. This is also corroborated by the fact that the proportion of “voluntary” emigration is especially high among those who cited a desire for per-

sonal change or a job offer abroad as the main reason for their emigration (without illustration).

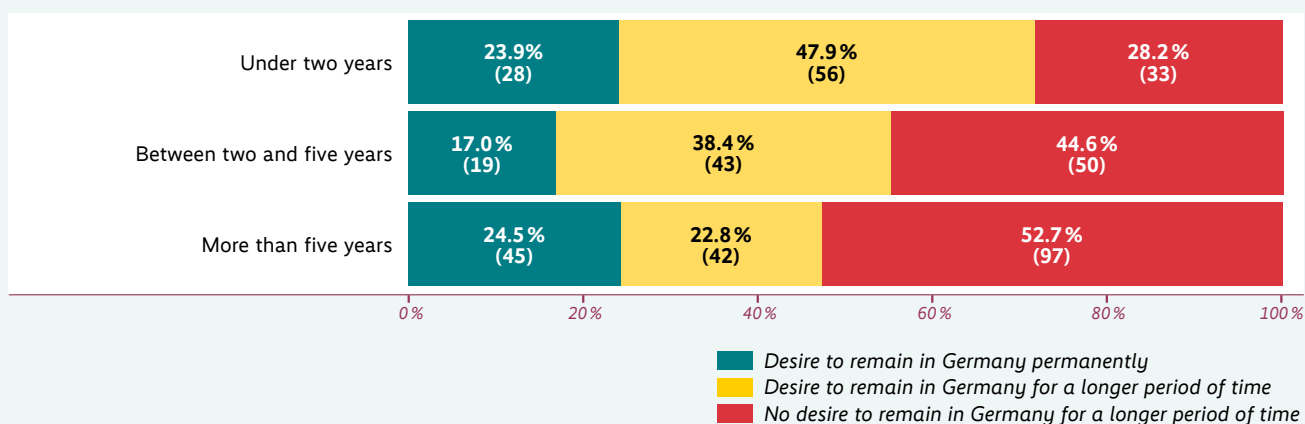
People who were satisfied with their social life in Germany tended to want to stay longer/permanently

The desire to stay longer in Germany is very strongly linked to satisfaction with social life. Those who felt socially well integrated were more likely to want to stay longer. Among those who did not want to stay longer in Germany, dissatisfaction with social life is particularly high: 55 percent of people who indicate that they would not have liked to stay longer in Germany were not (at all) satisfied with their social life in Germany. That is around 22 percentage points more than the group that would have liked to stay longer/permanently in Germany (Figure 22). Less pronounced is the difference when it comes to satisfaction with working life in Germany.

Desire for a longer stay in Germany* by length of stay

Fig. 21

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



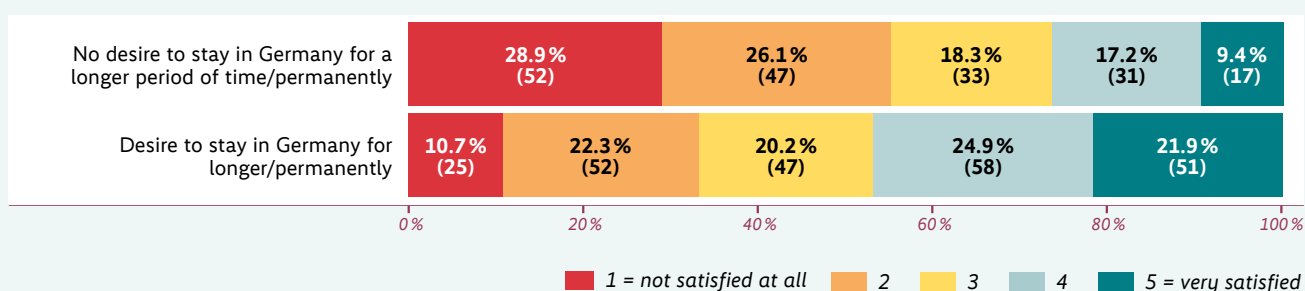
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "Would you have liked to stay longer in Germany?"

Satisfaction with social life according to desire to stay*

Fig. 22

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "How satisfied were you with your social life at the time?" and "Would you have liked to stay (longer) in Germany?"

The results show that people in our sample with shorter stays more frequently emigrate to their country or origin than to a third country. There is also a link between uncertainty surrounding residence status and employment and "involuntary" emigration, which predominantly takes place to the country of origin. After a longer stay, emigration is more often "voluntary" and in connection with a job offer or the desire for personal change. It can also be observed that dissatisfaction with working and especially social life went hand in hand with a reduced desire to stay in Germany for longer. The following chapter examines the reasons for emigration in more detail.

3.2.1 Reasons for emigration

When it comes to the reasons for emigration, a distinction is made between the main reason and the specific reasons for choosing a particular destination country. In addition, the factors

in Germany that encouraged emigration are also recorded. Asking about both the reasons that led to emigration from Germany (such as economic insecurity or residency requirements) and the incentives that spoke in favour of choosing a certain destination country (such as better career opportunities or family networks), enables a comprehensive understanding of migration decisions and illustrates the different dimensions of emigration decisions.

Reasons for emigration are much more individual and complex than those for immigration

When asked about the main reason for emigration from Germany, almost one quarter of respondents (22.6 percent) indicate that they left Germany mainly due to a job offer abroad. In addition, family reasons (20.7 percent) play a particularly important role,¹³ while the remaining reasons were only cited

¹³ The qualitative responses clearly show that this includes family obligations in the country of origin – one respondent wrote, for example, that she had to care for surviving children in her country of origin after a death in the family. A person from Spain writes that she has to look after her mother dependent on care in her country of origin. Several other respondents also emphasise again in the qualitative responses that proximity to friends and/or family is decisive for their place of residence.

by 2.2 to 6.3 percent of respondents (Figure 23). However, the most common reason given in our survey for emigrating from Germany is “another reason”. This is particularly interesting, as only 5.8 percent of respondents cited another reason when asked about the reason for immigration (see Chapter 3.1.1). This suggests that the selected response categories more precisely capture the target group’s main reasons for immigration than is the case with emigration. This could imply that emigration is less event-driven and cannot necessarily be attributed to a specific, clear reason, such as a job offer, a university place or family reunification, as is more the case with the initial immigration. Decisions to emigrate thus appear to have far more individual, diverse, and complex motives that cannot always be reduced to a single main reason. This should be taken into account in future political decisions. When discussing the detailed factors for emigration (see Figure 25), it becomes clear that those who cited “another reason” as the main reason for leaving Germany were more likely to cite experiences of discrimination and racism (31.3 percent instead of 23.8 percent), dissatisfaction with the political and social situation (32.1 instead of 22.1 percent) and less frequently poor career opportunities (9.7 instead of 19.5 percent) than the average respondent. It can be concluded from this that psychosocial and, in particular, social dissatisfaction was a greater cause of emigration than a specific professional or family reason.

The reason for immigration is not the same as the reason for emigration

If we compare the reasons for emigration with those of immigration, it is clear that among respondents, work and education-related reasons (training; degree course; internship; job offer; job search) were far less important for emigration (33.6 percent, see Figure 23) than for immigration (overall 67.2 percent, see Figure 10). On the other hand, family reasons are more important for emigration (20.7 percent) than

for immigration (9.3 percent), which could be explained by failed family reunification or the desire to return to family, family obligations.

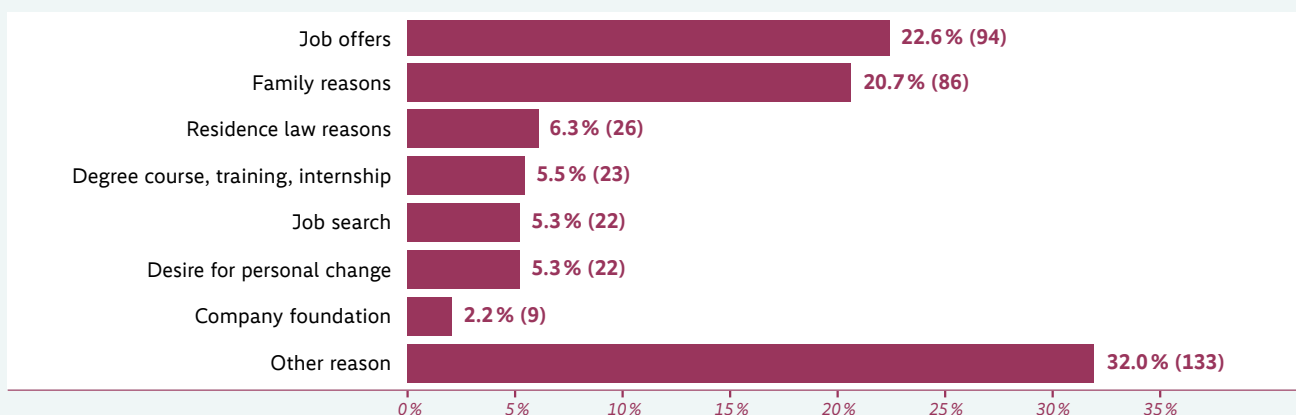
If we compare the correlation between the reason for immigration and emigration, it becomes clear that most respondents who came to Germany for a job offer either left Germany again because of another job offer (34.7 percent) or cite “another reason” (34.7 percent). 23.7 percent of them left for family reasons. 14 per cent of respondents who came to Germany for a degree course have left Germany to continue their studies in another country. This proportion could be attributed to international student exchange programmes that only allow a temporary stay in Germany. Following the end of the exchange year or semester, many students therefore return to their home university to complete their degree course there. However, one quarter of the students emigrated for a job offer and 8.6 percent to look for a job. From an economic perspective, this is problematic because well-educated specialists who have studied in Germany are lost to the local labour market. When taking a joint look at immigration and emigration factors, it is clear that emigration decisions are linked to factors of the original immigration; though this does not necessarily have to be the case.

When broken down by regions of origin (see Figure 24), we can see that among respondents from Asia and Oceania – as was the case with the reason for immigration (see Figure 10) – work and education-related reasons dominate emigration, although they are much less important here as well. While these are still decisive factors in the immigration of people from South and Central America, “other reasons” predominate in their emigration.

*Main reason for emigration**

Fig. 23

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



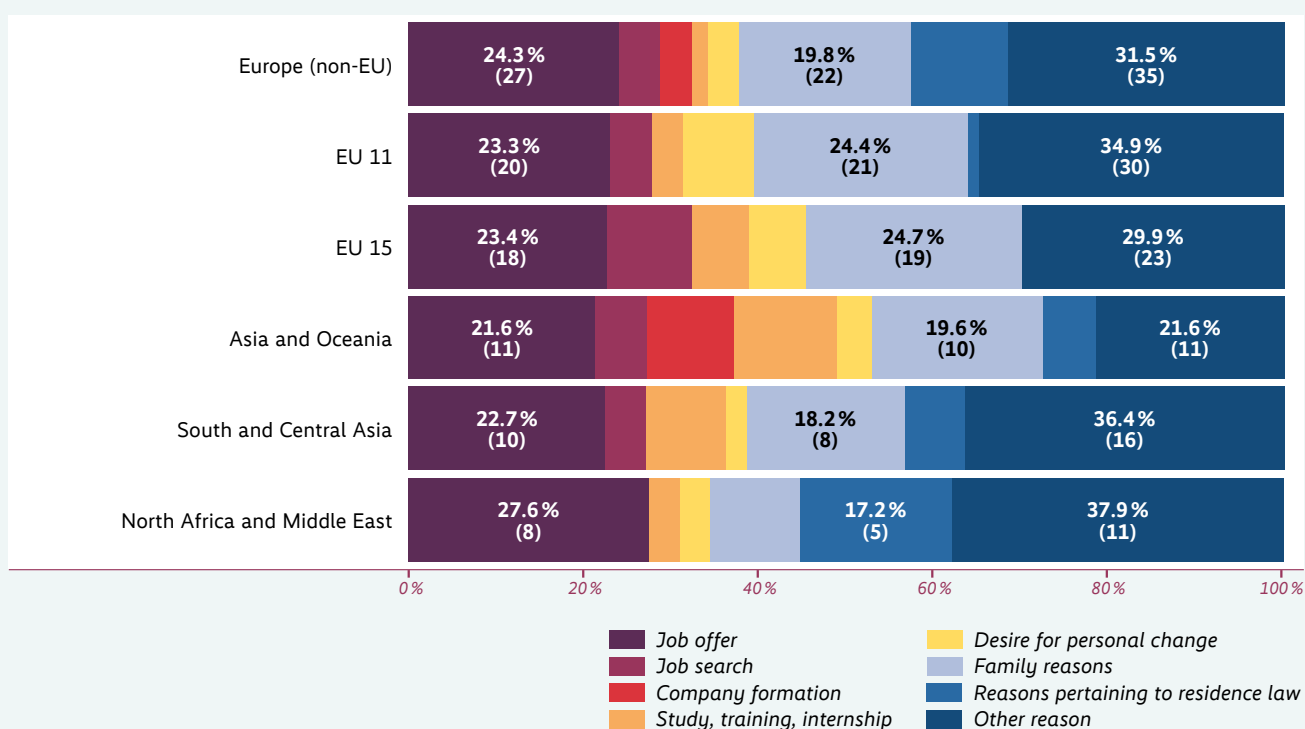
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: “What was the main reason for your decision to leave Germany?”

Main reason for emigration by region of origin

Fig. 24

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

The lack of welcoming culture in Germany is the most important factor in emigration

In addition to the main reason for emigration, it is important to understand what reasons in Germany itself play a role in emigration. This knowledge helps to develop political measures to specifically reduce incentives and reasons for unwanted emigration.

A significant proportion of respondents cite psychosocial reasons for their decision to emigrate: 38.1 percent indicate that they did not feel at least or at home in Germany. This particularly applies to people from North Africa and the Middle East.¹⁴ In second place is dissatisfaction with social life in Germany (31 percent). This proportion is particularly high among respondents from EU-11 countries, at 41.9 percent, while it only amounts to 28.6 percent among the EU-15 countries (without illustration). Other important factors are the feeling of not being welcome (27.4 percent), as well as experiences of discrimination and racism (23.8 percent).

Here, too, people from North African and the Middle East in particular cite these reasons (58.6 percent and 48.3 percent

respectively) (without illustration). With respect to the psychosocial reasons we surveyed (did not feel at home/at ease; dissatisfaction with social life in Germany; a feeling of not being welcome in Germany; experiences of discrimination/racism), we observe that, particularly those who had lived in Germany for two to five years, perceived these to be decisive factors for their emigration (without illustration). By contrast, respondents who have lived in Germany for less than two years or more than five years are less likely to attach relevance to these reasons for their emigration. One explanation for this could be that, during the first two years of immigration or in the event of temporary migration, people pay less attention to psychosocial factors, or they identify less with the country of immigration. It is also possible that factors such as discrimination or an absent feeling of being welcome are perceived less or are given less attention in the first few years of residence. The lower incidence of these reasons after five years could, however, be due to more advanced social integration.¹⁵

The prevalence of psychosocial reasons for emigration, particularly the role of experiences with discrimination and racism made in various areas of life, also reflected in the free

¹⁴ 65.5 of respondents from North Africa and the Middle East stated that they did not feel at ease/at home in Germany (without illustration).

¹⁵ The proportion of those who cited a poor education, social and healthcare system as the reason for emigration, increases with the length of the stay. The same applies to dissatisfaction with the political or social situation. This suggests that, as time goes on, people establish a stronger identification with the institutions, gain more experience with them, and are thus able to perceive problems more clearly.

text responses. They emphasise that discrimination is widespread in German society as well as in institutions and authorities:

“I was subject to racist abuse during my degree at university by professors, on the street, by the immigration authorities, and at my children’s school.” Person from Peru

“Germany’s culture is not inclusive. It is a very challenging society. No matter how harmoniously people behave towards Turks, discrimination is at the highest level. Seeing this perspective, even in the most progressive academic environments, has alienated me from the country.” Person from Turkey

“Some Germans are of course nice, but institutional racism is a major problem and caused me a lot of psychological problems.” Person from Spain

“We were strongly discriminated against in Germany, even in academic institutions. Life there is extremely hard due to the colour of our skin and our lack of German language skills. Discrimination is everywhere, like on a tram, in a cafeteria, in a town hall, etc. It’s very annoying.” Person from Turkey

In addition to psychosocial reasons, financial and career-related factors also play a role in the decision to leave Germany. For instance, 26.9 percent of respondents cite high living costs or taxes in Germany as a reason for emigrating.¹⁶ This applies particularly often to people from the EU-11 countries, among whom 40.7 percent indicate this reason.¹⁷ Dissatisfaction with working conditions or payment and what are rated as poor career opportunities in Germany are cited as reasons for emigrating by around 20 percent of respondents in each case (see Figure 25). The latter was a decisive factor in leaving the country, especially for people from Oceania and Asia. This observation fits with the trend that both work- and education-related reasons play a dominant role in the immigration and emigration of this group of origin.

Dissatisfaction with working conditions in Germany tends to motivate emigration to a third country rather than their country of origin

When analysing the reasons for emigration, if we distinguish between whether people have emigrated to their country of origin or emigrated to another country, we see that dissatisfaction with conditions in Germany is more pronounced for almost all factors among those who have moved to another country. For most psychosocial and work-related factors, the proportion for this group is almost ten percentage points

higher.¹⁸ Particularly striking is the difference regarding dissatisfaction with working conditions in Germany, which plays a far greater role in emigration to a third country (35.8 percent) than to the country of origin (15.1 percent) (see Figure 26). This could be attributed to the fact that many respondents originally came to Germany due to the professional and economic attractiveness of the German labour market, which in many cases may have been more advantageous than the labour market in their country of origin. However, if Germany proves to be a disappointment in such aspects, these people may look for better working conditions in a third country in order to improve their professional and financial situation than to return to their country of origin, which may be economically worse off.

Psychosocial factors and a distinct culture of welcome in the destination country motivate emigration

If we look at the factors in the destination country that favour emigration from Germany (pull factors), it becomes clear that psychosocial reasons are also at the forefront here. These include the feeling of being at home in the destination country (43.8 percent), the proximity to family and friends (40.2 percent), the feeling of being welcome there (39.0 percent) and the proximity to their own culture or religion (24.5 percent). Economic reasons play an important role, too: A large proportion of respondents cite good labour market opportunities in the destination country (29.8 percent), good career opportunities (28.8 percent) and good working conditions (24.8 percent). On the other hand, political and institutional reasons for emigration to the destination country are less common: for instance, merely 14.8 percent of respondents cited the education, social or healthcare system in the destination country as a reason, while the political and social situation (10.2 percent), the respect for human rights (6.2 percent) or support with childcare (5.6 percent) were only rarely mentioned (see Figure 27). The factors in Germany and the factors in the destination country that influenced the decision to emigrate complement each other logically: The majority of respondents left Germany because they did not feel at ease or welcome or had experienced discrimination and racism. In the destination country, on the other hand, the feeling of being welcome and feeling at ease there are the main factors for emigration. Economic reasons come in second place for both the push and pull factors.

If we more precisely differentiate the reasons in the destination country, depending on whether respondents emigrate to their country of origin or to a third country, we see that for third countries, economic factors in particular such as good

¹⁶ The high tax rates are also often mentioned in the free text responses as a criticism of Germany. In this context, respondents also criticise that, despite high tax rates, bureaucratic processes are outdated and slow, especially for immigrants: “We express significant concerns regarding the value of taxes paid, especially with regard to access to healthcare, immigration services and other bureaucratic processes”. Person from India

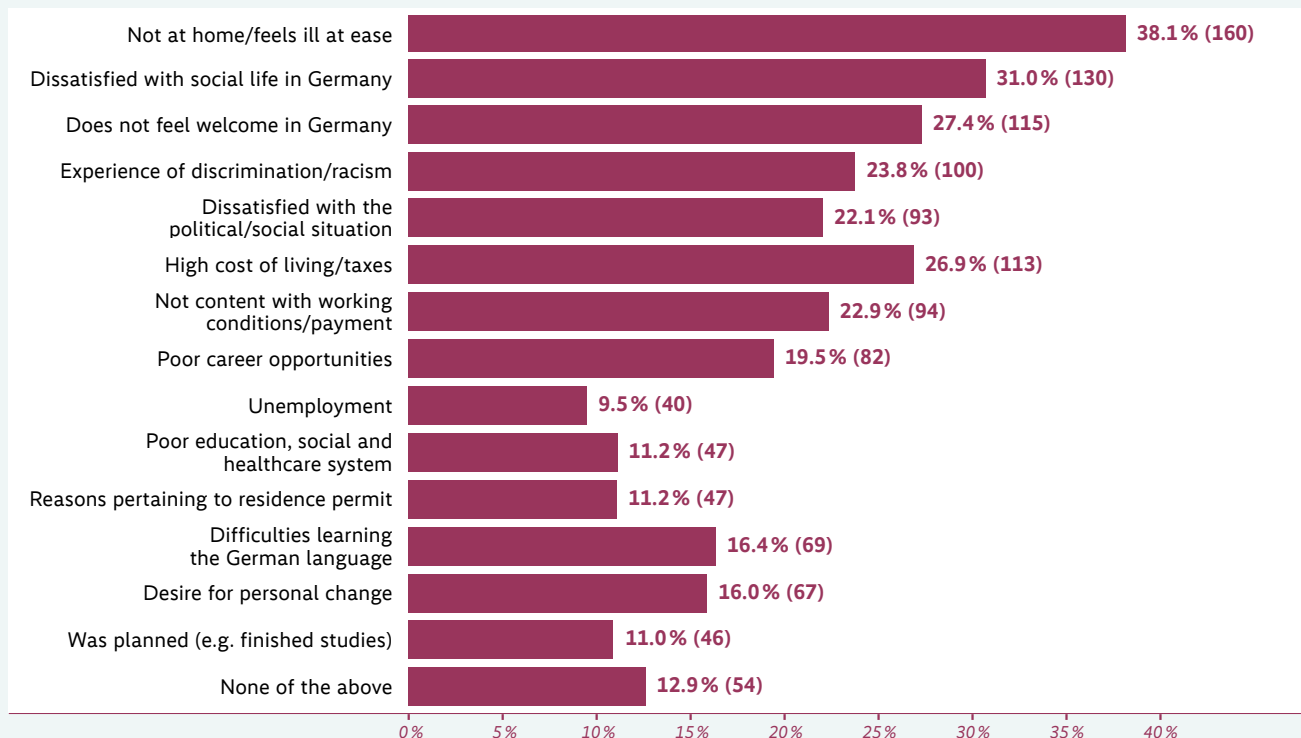
¹⁷ Romanian and Bulgarian nationals, who are particularly well represented in the survey, earn considerably less compared to their German colleagues – even with the same level of job requirements and qualifications, as shown in studies by the Centre for Immigration and Integration (Dülken/Shibeshi 2024; Spitaleri 2022). The survey results corroborate this picture: People from the EU-11 countries state that they earn less than respondents from other regions of origin – with the exception of those from South and Central America, who earn even lower wages (without illustration). This could contribute to this group of people being particularly sensitive to the high cost of living and taxes in Germany. Added to this is the considerable difference in the tax burden: While the income tax rate in Romania and Bulgaria is just ten percent, Germany applies a progressive tax rate of 14 percent for an individual income of EUR 10,909 in 2023, for example, and 42 percent for an income of EUR 62,809 (Federal Ministry of Finance 2024).

¹⁸ This also means that these respondents cite more reasons for emigration than those who return to their country of origin.

Factors contributing to emigration (push factors) in Germany*

Fig. 25

Multiple selections possible, figures in percent, absolute figures in brackets



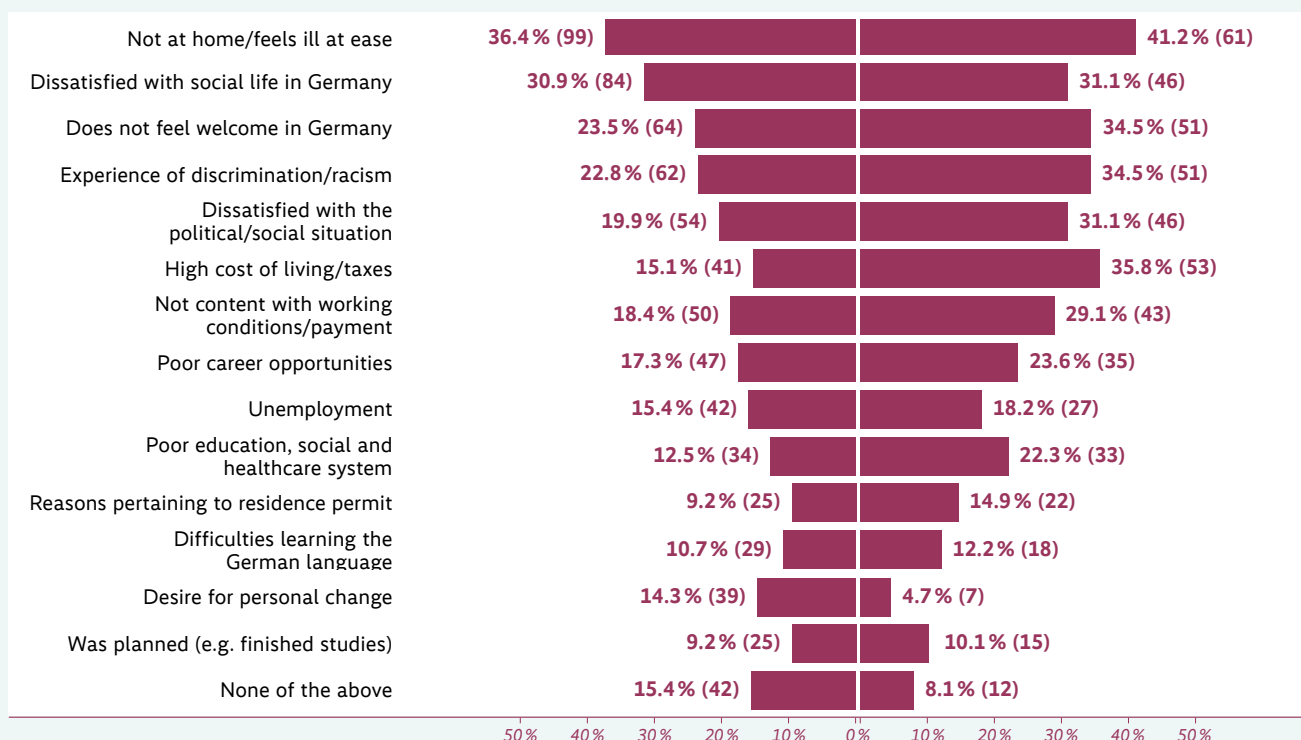
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "Why did you emigrate from Germany?"

Emigration factors (push factors) in Germany to the destination country of emigration

Fig. 26

in the event of emigration to the county of origin / emigration to another country



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

opportunities to find work (37.8 percent), better career opportunities (37.8 percent) or more favourable working conditions (44.6 percent, compared to only 14 percent in the country of origin) have a stronger pull effect than in the countries of origin.

For those who return to their country of origin, however, psychosocial motives clearly dominate such as the desire to be close to family or the feeling of being connected to their own culture.

Nevertheless, the feeling of being welcome remains the most important reason (45.2 percent) even when migrating to a destination country other than the country of origin (no illustration). This underscores how essential a functioning welcome culture and numerous social integration programmes are for strengthening the sense of belonging among immigrants in Germany and reducing unwanted, originally unplanned emigration. Only an environment where people feel welcome and valued can longstanding ties be created and psychosocial motives for emigration be reduced.

The participants were able to select several answers to the questions on reasons for emigrating from Germany (see Figure 25) and for their destination country (see Figure 27). A look at the average number of reasons given shows some clear differences in the dependence on certain characteristics: the further back in time the emigration took place, the fewer reasons are cited for Germany and the destination country.

Respondents who emigrated between 2000 and 2024 cited on average 3.7 reasons for emigration from Germany and 4.1 reasons for emigrating to their destination country. By contrast, those who emigrated prior to 2020 indicated an average of only 1.6 reasons in Germany and 1.8 reasons in the destination country.

This difference can probably be explained by the recall bias known from retrospective surveys. This states that the memory of events that took place longer ago fades over time, so that the particularly memorable factors remain in the memory, whereas less striking aspects are forgotten. As opposed to this, those who only emigrated a few years ago probably have a clearer memory of the many different factors that led to their decision to emigrate. There is also the risk that events that took place long ago are subject to a positive distortion of memory, the so-called "rosy retrospection", whereby they are perceived more positively in retrospect than they actually were (Mitchell et al. 1997; Smith/Thomas 2002, 1997; Adler/Pansky 2020; Schwarz/Oyserman 2001).

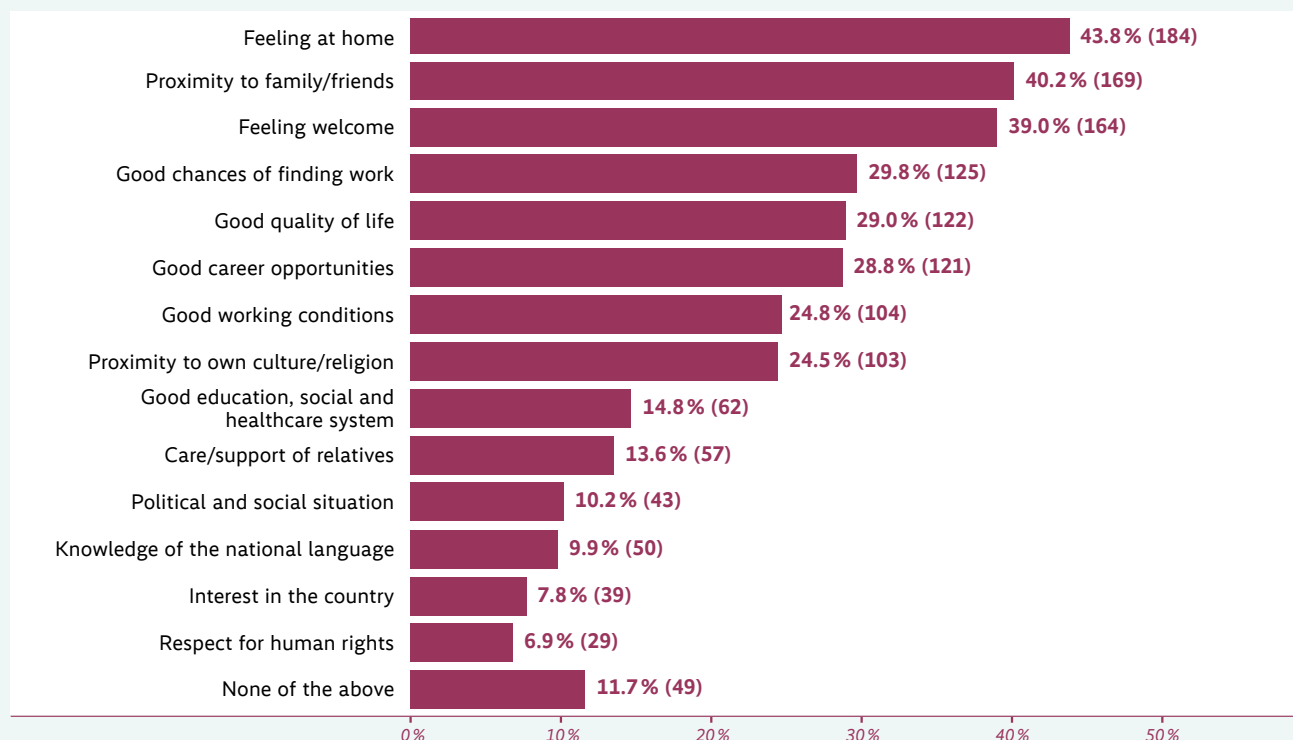
Involuntary emigration occurs in particular for a few, but more serious reasons

A difference in the average number of reasons for emigration is also evident – albeit less pronounced – when respondents are categorised according to whether they would have liked to stay in Germany for longer or even permanently. Those who

Emigration factors (pull factors) in the country of origin*

Fig. 27

Multiple selections possible, figures in percent, absolute figures in parentheses



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "Why did you emigrate to this country in particular?"²³

would have liked to stay longer/permanently cited on average fewer reasons for emigration both in Germany (2.6 reasons) and in the destination country (2.9 reasons) than those who did not want to stay longer (3.9 in Germany and 4.6 reasons in the destination country) (no illustration). This indicates that the accumulation of reasons for emigration in various areas of life makes voluntary emigration more likely. In contrast, those who had to “involuntarily” leave and would have liked to stay longer gave fewer reasons overall in favour of emigration; however, these reasons may still be so serious that emigration becomes unavoidable, such as residence permit obstacles. A more precise look at the reasons given by people who would have liked to stay longer in Germany shows not only a lower number of reasons for emigration, but also a more even distribution of these reasons among the various response options. These people most frequently cite the high cost of living and taxes in Germany (23.2 percent). Psychosocial factors, too, such as the feeling of not being at home (22 percent) and dissatisfaction with social life (21.6 percent) play an important role – but to a much lesser extent than the average of the entire survey group (38.1 and 31 percent respectively). For the group of “involuntary” emigrants, on the other hand, unemployment and residence permit reasons are more significant factors for emigration (without illustration).

Overall, the results show that decisions to emigrate, much less than the original decision to immigrate, cannot always be reduced to a single main reason. Decisions to emigrate therefore appear to have far more individual, multifaceted and complex motives. In our survey sample, psychosocial reasons play a dominant role – both in the decision against Germany and in the decision in favour of another country. Economic reasons come in second place, which could be due to the fact that the sample predominantly consists of highly qualified people.

3.2.2 Assessment of the situation in the current country of residence

After analysing the reasons for emigration, it is also worth taking the respondents’ current situation in the country of residence into account. Not only does this enable a comparison with the previous situation in Germany, but also affords important insights into the reality of the respondents’ lives. This perspective helps to understand how their experiences in the current country of residence, whether it be in the country of origin or another country, influence their decision to stay, to move on to another country or return to Germany.

Higher satisfaction with working life in a third country than in the country of origin

If we look at satisfaction with working life in Germany compared to the current country of residence, for example, it becomes clear that respondents are generally more satisfied with their current working life than they were in Germany: 45 percent indicate that they were (very) satisfied with working life in Germany (see Figure 14), while in the current country of residence it is 58.9 percent (see Figure 28).

A breakdown by country of destination also reveals that this difference mainly occurs due to those respondents who currently live in a third country (see Figure 29): 72.3 percent of these respondents are (very) satisfied with their current working life. Here, we can draw a parallel with the tendency for working conditions to be a much more important factor in emigration to a third country than emigration to the country of origin (see Figure 26).

Higher satisfaction with social life in the country of origin and third country compared to Germany

Satisfaction with social life shows a similar picture; respondents rated this as being significantly better in their current country of residence than in Germany. 62.6 percent are currently (very) satisfied with their social life (see Figure 28), whereas in Germany it was only 37.7 percent (see Figure 14). The fact that the greater satisfaction in their current country of residence is not only due to existing social networks in the country of origin is clear to see, as people who have emigrated to a country other than their country of origin are far more satisfied than previously in Germany: 60.4 percent are (very) satisfied with their current social life in the third country.

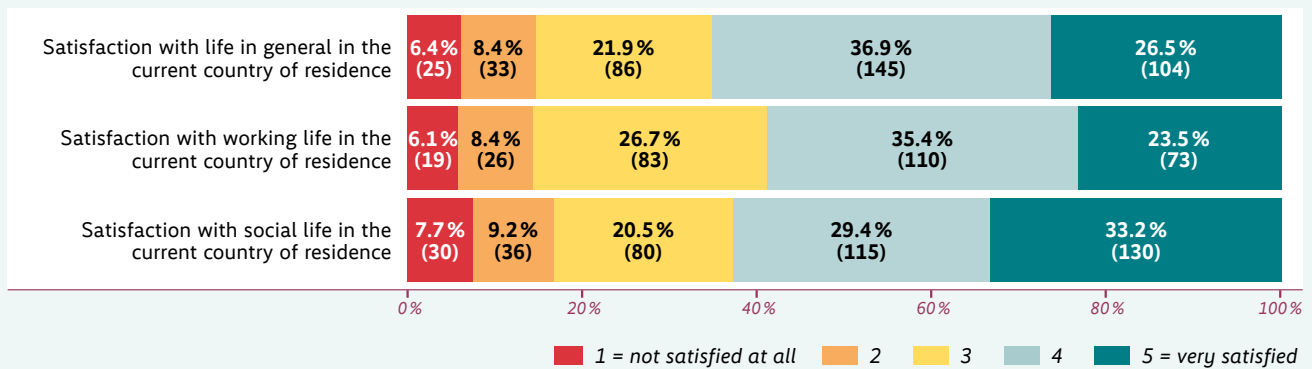
In this regard, it is also interesting to look at the planned duration of stay in the current country of residence. Among those who were living in a third country at the time of the survey, around one third were unsure about their future plans, 22.5 percent want to stay for a few more years and 37.2 percent want to stay permanently. Even among those who live in their country of origin, almost half of the respondents plan to stay there permanently, however, more than one third state that they only wanted to stay a few more years. A further 9.2 percent also plan to stay only one more year.

Responses to the current situation in the country of residence reveal that the respondents are generally more satisfied with their working and social life in the new country of residence than in Germany. This applies both to those who have returned to their country of origin, and to those who have moved on to a third country. Nevertheless, there is also a considerable number of respondents who are dissatisfied in their new country of residence and uncertain about their long-term future there. This opens up potential for onward and return migration, which we will analyse in more detail in the following chapter.

Satisfaction in the current country of residence*

Fig. 28

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



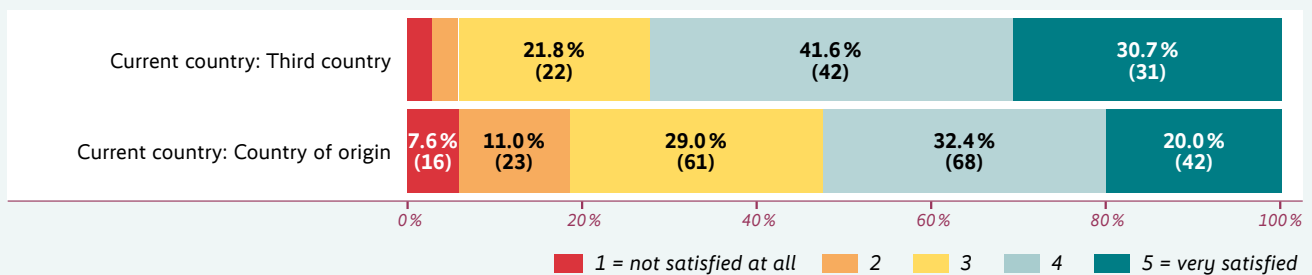
* Answer to the questions: "How satisfied are you with your life at the moment?", "How satisfied are you currently with your working life?" and "How satisfied are you currently with your social life?".

Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

Satisfaction with working life by current country of residence

Fig. 29

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets

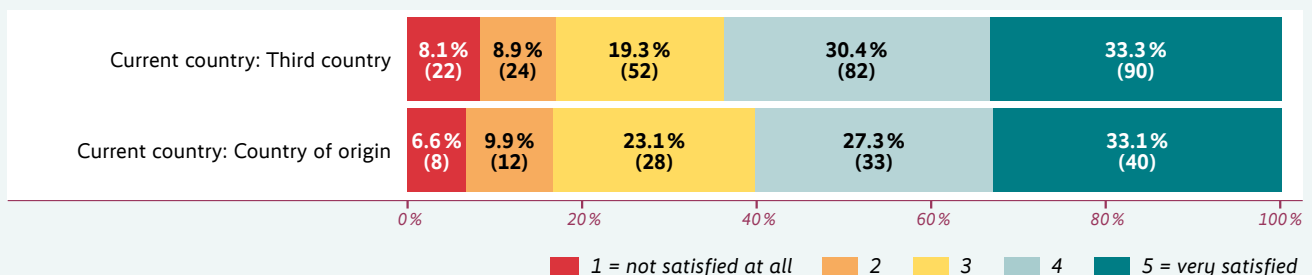


Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

Satisfaction with social life by current country of residence

Fig. 30

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

3.3 Intention to return or for onward migration

The previous questions dealt with past migration decisions or the past or present life situations of the respondents. Questions about possible return or onward migration endeavours are asked ex ante. Future migration endeavours are an elusive and multi-dimensional phenomenon, however (Carling/Bålsrud Mjelva 2021). Accordingly, the respondents' future migration plans are recorded using a combination of different questions:

- Preferences/wishes: "Would you rather remain in your current country or emigrate to another country?"
- Considerations/reflections:
 - "Have you recently toyed with the idea of leaving your current country of residence and returning to Germany for a longer period or even permanently?"
 - "Have you recently toyed with the idea of leaving your current country of residence and moving to a country other than Germany for a longer period or even permanently?"

The reason for this differentiated enquiry is that the desire and consideration of emigration do not necessarily coincide. The results may therefore vary greatly depending on the question posed. A person or group may express the desire to move to another country, for example, without actually intending (or having the option) to do so. Conversely, someone might seriously consider emigration, such as due to financial constraints, even though he or she would rather stay in the current country of residence if given the choice.

At a later date, those respondents who are considering returning to Germany are also asked about the likelihood of their return. After all, even if they seriously consider returning, the realisation of such plans may be deemed unlikely for various reasons, for instance, as a result of family obligations or residence permit restrictions.

A minority of respondents consider returning to Germany

As it turns out, 60.9 percent of respondents state that they would rather stay in their current country of residence than move to another country (39.1 percent). A similar picture emerges when asked about a possible return migration to Germany: 60.5 percent of respondents state that they are not considering a return to Germany. A slightly larger proportion state that they are toying with the idea of moving to a country other than Germany (see Figure 31). At first glance, there is hardly any difference in percentage between the desire to emigrate and the serious consideration of actually taking this step.

The desire to emigrate or stay and the actual consideration diverge

However, a closer analysis shows that the desire and actual consideration do not necessarily coincide: Almost 30 percent of respondents who do wish to emigrate again are nevertheless considering leaving their current country: 12.8 percent are thinking about returning to Germany; eleven percent consider onward migration to another country:

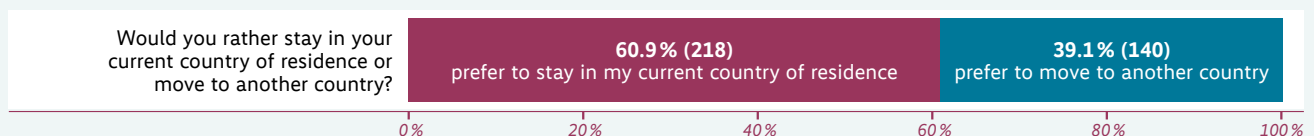
both options are possible for five percent of respondents. The fact that the desire and consideration diverge could be due to financial or family constraints, for instance, or the economic or political situation the country of residence. The majority

Desire to migrate, thoughts of return and onward migration

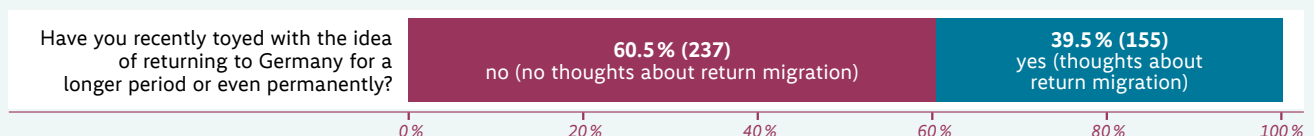
Fig. 31

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets

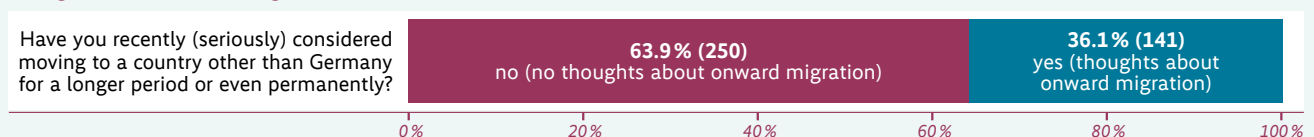
The desire to return or for onward migration



Thoughts about return migration



Thoughts about onward migration



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

of those who wish to emigrate are actually thinking about emigrating again (92.1 percent).

Of the 39.5 percent of respondents who are considering returning, half of them have Germany as their only desired destination (see Figure 32). In the open-ended questions, some justify this by saying that they already have knowledge of the German language due to their previous stay and know “how things work” [person from Bosnia and Herzegovina]. They therefore feel familiar with the processes and structures in the country. Several respondents describe how this would make Germany the more obvious choice:

“A different destination would be a more significant change in my life and would therefore be a challenge.” Person from North Macedonia

“Because I’m already used to living there. I don’t want to now move to a new country.” Person from India

Some respondents complement this aspect of habit and familiarity with a general satisfaction with Germany, its politics and rule of law as well as its culture and quality of life:

“I already speak the language, feel accepted here, know the culture and mentality and like some of the German values and characteristics. I wouldn’t have to start from scratch. You are relatively safe in difficult times and are supported by the social system, and there are opportunities for personal development. [...] I like the fact that they invest a lot in green transformations, which creates more sense and motivation than in places where progress is hindered at every step, nothing happens at all, EU funding is squandered (bad or poorly realised projects) or, worse still, stolen.” Person from Croatia

“The law regulates civil and human rights, employee rights etc., and the same rights are applied.” Person from Bosnia and Herzegovina

“Fantastic quality of life, lots of nature in the cities. I now speak German very well and have friends there.” Person from France

The fact that relationships with partners, colleagues or family are important can also be seen in the responses of other respondents:

“Because I can already speak German and still have a lot of friends in Germany.” Person from Japan

“I miss Germany, my colleagues, friends and my favourite city, Frankfurt am Main, where I have lived for 15 years! I feel at home there! I miss everything, including my interesting and secure job with the best boss and the best colleagues! I love Germany!” Person from Bulgaria, 1544

“After all, my children live there and I miss them very much.”

Person from Spain

What’s more, some respondents emphasise that professional opportunities would draw them back to Germany.

Here, however, it is important to remember the disproportionate number of respondents with an academic degree, which is also reflected in the following quotes:

“During my stay in Germany, I studied/conducted research in a laboratory with extensive experience in researching language and gestures as part of my internship for my doctoral thesis. I would like to return there to obtain my doctorate.” Person from Brazil

“Germany is the best research location for my work.”

Person from Japan

Finally, the respondents also have purely emotional ties to Germany:

“Because Germany is like my own country, my home, I can’t think of any other country.” Person from Bulgaria

Also, during my time elsewhere, I realised that I am very emotionally attached to Germany despite the distance.” Person from France

“Because after all these years in Germany, I feel German.”

Person from the Czech Republic

Openness, welcome culture, and efficient administration are strengths of other destination countries

The other half of respondents, who consider returning to Germany, also toy with the idea of moving to a country other than Germany. Around one quarter of the 60.5 percent who are not thinking about returning to Germany are considering moving to another country (see Figure 32). When asked about the possible destination countries for onward migration, Switzerland, the Netherlands, the US, the UK, Austria, and Spain were mentioned in particular (without illustration).

When responding to the open question about the advantages of other destination countries compared to Germany, the respondents often cite lower taxes and lower costs of living. A further advantage that many emphasise is other countries’ greater acceptance of communicating in English rather than the local language. In this context, the more efficient and more digitalised bureaucracy in other countries is often positively emphasised. One respondent describes this as follows:

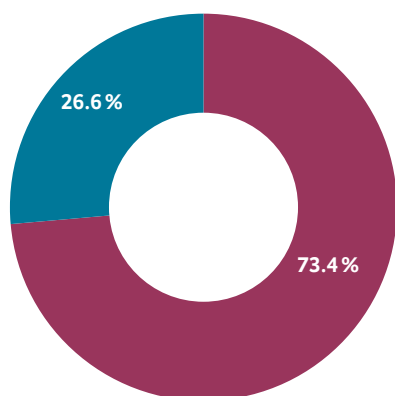
“You can work and survive from day to day without having to be absolutely fluent in the local languages, and, unlike in Germany, native speakers speak good English. No problems with the authorities, and everything can be done online.” Person from India

Thoughts of returning according to thoughts of onward migration*

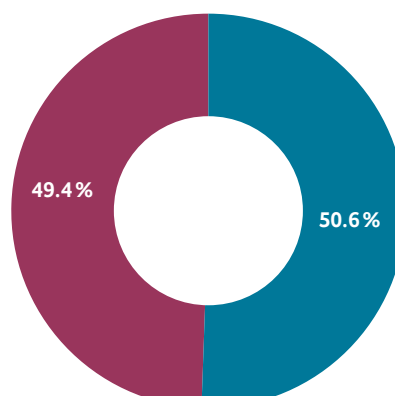
Fig. 32

Data in percent

no thoughts about
returning to Germany



thoughts about
returning to Germany



Thoughts of onward migration
No thoughts of onward migration

Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answers to the question: "Have you recently toyed with the idea of returning to Germany for a longer period or even permanently?", differentiated according to the consideration of moving to a country other than Germany.

Another person also perceives that there is an unwillingness in Germany to communicate in languages other than German, and links this with the perception of unfriendliness or coldness:

"If I emigrate to a country, then it certainly won't be Germany, but to countries where people are warmer and more hospitable and not cold, sober, and nationalistic, and who only answer in German and don't know other international languages." Person from Moldova

Similar to in this quote, other respondents often criticise the attitude of German society and its nature, which is sometimes perceived as unfriendly: Added to this, some respondents emphasise that other countries have a more open immigration policy and a better welcome culture compared to Germany:

"I think that the immigration policy [of Canada and the Netherlands] provides more comfort to people coming into the country compared to Germany." Person from Turkey

"I think that there is a more inclusive life for immigrants when it comes to language and culture." Person from Turkey

"Easier to become a resident and dual citizen." Person from Turkey

"The US is a country where immigrants are welcome. It sees it as a benefit for them that a person is coming to make a contribution to the country." Person from Chile

Other oft-cited advantages of other countries relate to aspects that lie outside the sphere of influence of German politics and society. These include the more pleasant climate and greater geographical proximity to respondents' country of origin.

When asked the open question about what would have to change for them to return to Germany, some cite a deterioration of conditions in their current country of residence. One respondent stated, for instance that "enormous changes in the political and economic situation in France, with right-wing extremists firmly in power" [person from France, 8520] would be a reason to return. Others, on the other hand, emphasise that a return to Germany is completely out of the question. One person describes:

"Never return. The most racist and unfriendly people in the world. Why should you travel to a place where you are not welcome? We're not begging for anything, but instead we have a Master's degree to contribute towards the economy and if they don't want us, that doesn't matter to us and we will certainly be welcomed by other countries that value us." Person from Afghanistan

Other respondents make suggestions about what ought to be improved in Germany. Here, too, a greater openness of German society towards immigrants plays an important role. The outdated bureaucracy and language barriers were often mentioned:

“Reduce the amount of bureaucracy (it feels like the 90s) – people in public functions should speak English or have interpreters by their side (in the 13 years that I’ve been employed in Germany, my company has never been a German-speaking one) – people in public functions should be helpful and not resentful or racist.” Person from Poland

This demonstrates that most of the respondents are not considering returning to Germany. For those respondents who are contemplating returning to Germany, the main influencing factors include: familiarity with the system, existing language skills and psycho-social factors such as a feeling of acceptance and solidarity and personal relationships. When weighing up the possibility of moving on to another country, the respondents primarily consider the better bureaucracy elsewhere as well as greater acceptance or hospitality and the associated greater willingness or ability to communicate in English or other languages. This is reflected by respondents’ criticism of the perceived unfriendliness and racism as well as complicated bureaucratic processes in Germany.

3.3.1 Thoughts about returning differentiated according to various characteristics

An analysis of the thoughts of returning has shown that a total of 39.5 percent of respondents harbour thoughts of returning to Germany, while 60.5 percent do not share these thoughts. A closer look at thoughts of return migration in relation to certain characteristics of the respondents, such as age, region of origin or the voluntary nature of emigration, reveals clear differences in some cases (see Figure 33). At 33.8 percent, the thought of returning to Germany is below average among respondents aged 31 to 40. By contrast, 45.3 percent of over 50-year-olds are considering returning. People who are not in a relationship also show an over-average willingness to return compared to those who are in a stable relationship. This result is hardly surprising, as people without a partnership are often more flexible in their life decisions and have less ties to their current place of residence.

Especially respondents from North Africa, the Middle East and the new EU member states are less likely to contemplate returning to Germany.

If we look at thoughts of returning according to region of origin, this is the least pronounced among respondents from North Africa and the Middle East (22.2 percent), followed by those from the new EU member states (EU-11) (30.5 percent). Thoughts of returning appear to be strongest among respondents from South and Central America (54.8 percent) and Asia and Oceania (44.4 percent), however. When viewed by nationality, third-country nationals

more often toy with the idea of returning to Germany (44.8 percent) than those from EU member states or those who have already obtained German citizenship via naturalisation.

The analysis also illustrates that the idea of returning to Germany is far more pronounced among people who have returned to their country of origin than among those who have moved to another country. A possible reason for this could be that onward migration to a third country is associated with

higher material and immaterial costs than returning to the country of origin. Owing to investments already made in their onward migration, these people might be less inclined to reverse their decision to return to Germany. Another explanation could be that – as shown by the above analysis (Figure 20) – it is primarily those who would originally have liked to stay longer or permanently in Germany who have returned to their country of origin. Thoughts about returning are particularly strong among this group of “involuntary” emigrants (see Figure 33, bottom column).

Those who want to stay in their country of residence for less than one year or are unsure how long they want to stay represent the greatest potential for return.

When asked about their long-term plans in their current country of residence, it is unsurprising that those who aim to permanently remain in their current country of residence have the least thoughts about returning to Germany (14 percent). By way of contrast, 89.2 percent of those who want to stay less than one year are thinking about returning to Germany. Among respondents who are still unsure about how long they will remain in their current country, just under half (48.8 percent) are considering returning. Thoughts about returning are also more prevalent among the few who lived in the countryside or in a small town in Germany (47.2 percent) than among those who lived in a medium-sized or large city (37 percent). This is especially interesting in light of the fact that migration often takes place in urban areas (Oltmer 2021).

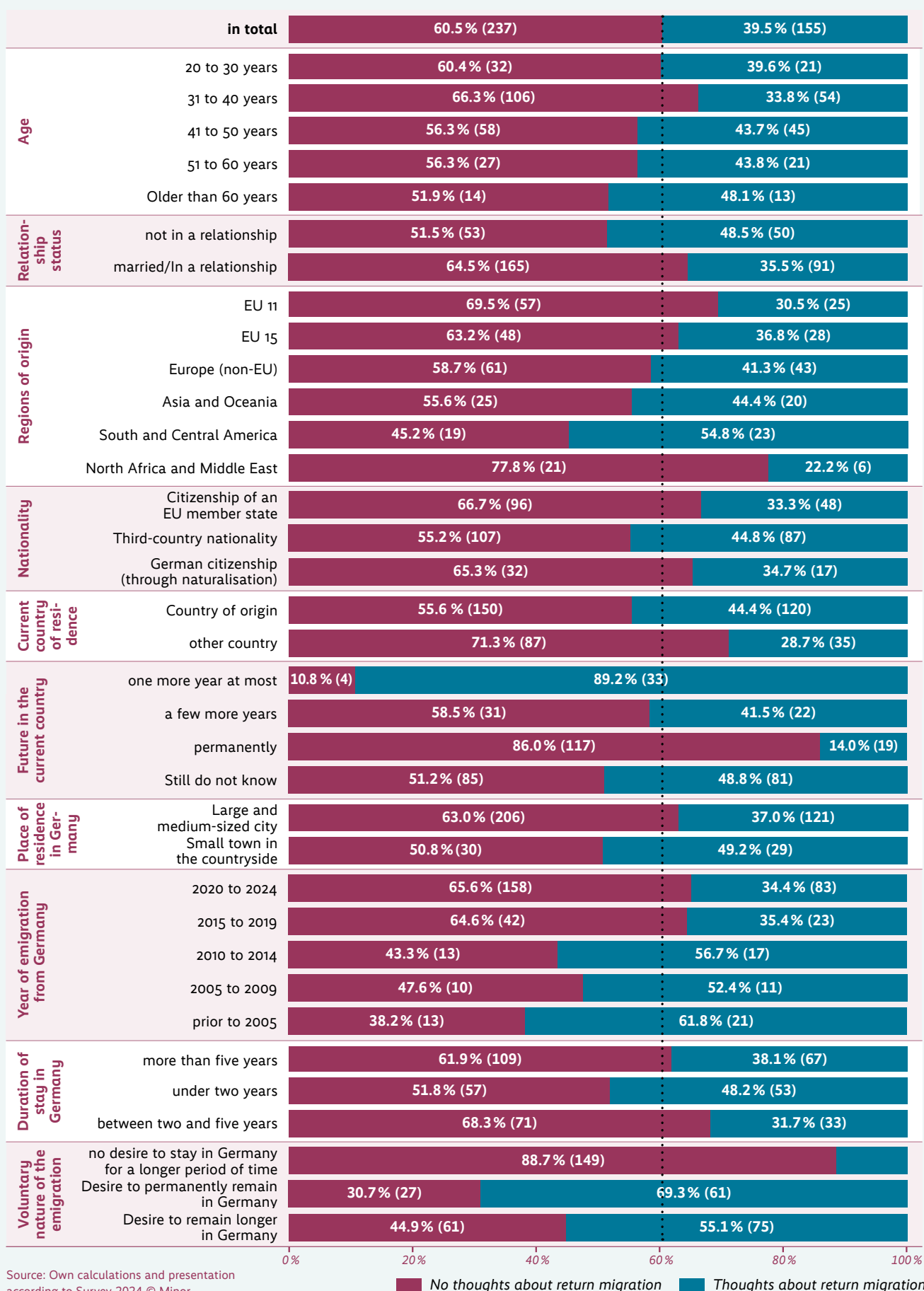
The longer ago the emigration from Germany took place, the prevalent are the thoughts about returning.

If we look at the answers with regard to the time of emigration from Germany, it becomes clear: The longer ago the emigration took place, the more likely people are to contemplate returning. Among the respondents who emigrated prior to 2005, 61.8 percent think about returning, while among those who emigrated between 2005 and 2014, the figure is 54.9 percent. Among those who emigrated between 2015 and today, the figure is only around 35 percent. The reasons for this could be that people who have recently emigrated in particular want to avoid the intangible and tangible costs of a new migration decision. Moreover, it is conceivable that the memory of a stay that was longer ago in the past leads to a positive distortion (the so-called “rosy

Thoughts of returning according to respondent characteristics

Fig. 33

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

■ No thoughts about return migration ■ Thoughts about return migration

retrospective”).¹⁹ Memories may also become more fragmented over time (recall bias) (Mitchell et al. 1997; Smith/Thomas 1997, 2002; Schwarz/Oyserman 2001; Adler/Pansky 2020).

If we differentiate according to the duration of stay in Germany, it is clear that those in particular who have spent less than two years in Germany more often consider returning (48.2 percent). Many of these people stated that they would have liked to stay longer or permanently in Germany. This “involuntary” emigration, caused by external factors such as residence permit regulations or study-related restrictions, explains why they are more likely to consider returning. People, on the other hand, who have spent between two and five years in Germany may have also had more negative experiences in Germany, for instance on the labour market. Accordingly, their thoughts of returning are less pronounced.

Overall, we can see that 39.5 percent of respondents are contemplating returning, although there are clear differences based on various characteristics such as age, region of origin, and whether the emigration was voluntary. The idea of returning is especially pronounced among older respondents and those who are not in a relationship, as well as those who have lived abroad for more than ten years. The duration of stay in the current destination country influences the intention to return, too: those who only want to stay for a short time or are unsure, are more likely to consider returning to Germany. We can also see that people who have emigrated “involuntarily” for external reasons, such as due to residence permit regulations or temporary study visits, are more likely to think about returning to Germany.

3.3.2 Thoughts of returning according to reasons for emigration

If we differentiate respondents’ intention to return according to the main reason for emigrating from Germany, it becomes clear that those who have left Germany for residence permit reasons are particularly interested in returning (70.8 percent).

However, those who emigrated from Germany for family reasons are the least interested in returning (32.5 percent) (without illustration).

Participants who toy with the idea of returning to Germany were also asked what the reason for returning to Germany is/would be. If we compare this reason for returning with the original reason for emigration, we can see that many respondents who left Germany for a job offer would return to Germany again for a job offer.

Dissatisfaction with the education, social, and healthcare system most greatly inhibits the willingness to return to Germany

If we look at the reasons for emigration that lie in Germany itself (push factors), it is evident that the desire to return is least pronounced among those who cite the education, social, and healthcare system, which they rate as poor, as the reason for emigration (thoughts about returning: 13 percent). Even in the open-ended questions with free text answers, the German education system is described as poor, outdated and difficult to access. While some people also report experiences of discrimination in the education system. Respondents also frequently cited the health, care, and social welfare system as a negative aspect of Germany. For example, two people write:

“The healthcare system is abysmal, if you don’t want to do anything, come to Germany and become a general practitioner. They receive you, examine you, prescribe ibuprofen or paracetamol and send you home.” Person from Croatia

“The quality of healthcare for children and education is poor and outdated, although it is supported by social security contributions that I have paid into.” Person from Pakistan

Thoughts about returning are also less prevalent among those who cited dissatisfaction with the political and social situation (18.2 percent) as the reason for emigration, as well as the feeling of not having felt at home or welcome in Germany (22.4 percent) (see Figure 34).

In terms of dissatisfaction with the political and social situation, the open-ended answers make it clear that some respondents consider German politics to be too liberal:

“The European Union’s domestic and foreign policy does not make me or my children feel safe- Imposing a certain ideology and way of thinking, even among children (e.g. sexual stress). The policies of the Greens are plunging Europe, and especially Germany, into the abyss.” Person from Morocco

“Look after the country’s national interests. Restore family values. Eliminate dependence on the United States.” Person from Latvia

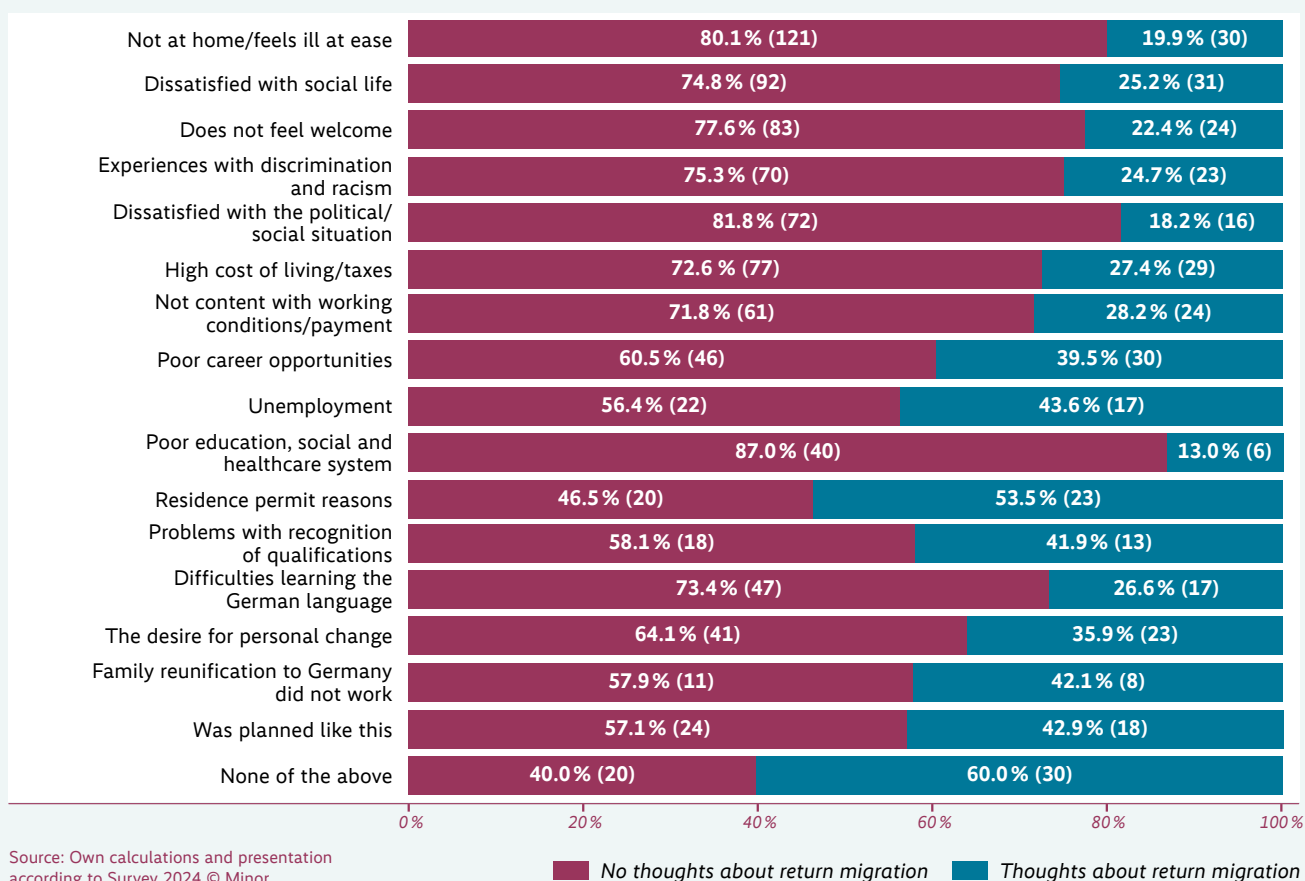
In this context, respondents also take a critical view of German immigration policy in recent years – particularly with regard to migration from countries of refugee origin. Some respondents expressed the view that Germany’s immigration policy does not always set the right priorities. On the other hand, some respondents, as already described in Chapter 3.2.1, voice their experiences of racism and discrimination in Germany. The following responses explicitly illustrate the fear of an increase in restrictive policies, the rise of right-wing parties in Germany and Europe and they

¹⁹ This is also reflected when analysing the average number of reasons for emigration: Those whose stay in Germany was longer ago cite fewer reasons for emigration than those whose memories of emigration are still fresh.

Thoughts of returning according to factors contributing to emigration Germany

Fig. 34

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



criticise Germany's foreign policy, especially in relation to the conflict between Israel and Palestine:

"The isolation and lack of empathy towards Gaza made the anger and resentment against Germany and Germans irreversible. [...] It is still too early to cite the rise of the right wing in Europe and Gaza as clear reasons, but I'm sure that this will be the case in the coming years. Current German policy has cost them the loss of highly qualified migrants, whether now or whenever they have the chance." Person from Egypt

One person writes in relation to why other countries (in this case: Ireland, Austria, and Switzerland) could also be attractive for onward migration:

"They are militarily neutral and do not send out signals of virtue when it comes to human rights violations, as Germany does. They will not use my taxes to finance the wars of others and destroy human lives. They do not call on other countries to adhere to the 'rule of law', while violating their own constitutional provisions not to supply weapons to active war zones." Person from India

Thoughts of returning are most pronounced among those who state that none of the above reasons were decisive for their emigration (60 percent). This suggests that, for these

people, the reasons for emigration were more focused on the destination country than on Germany. This is followed by those who left Germany for residence permit reasons (53.5 percent) or unemployment (43.6 percent) (see Figure 34).

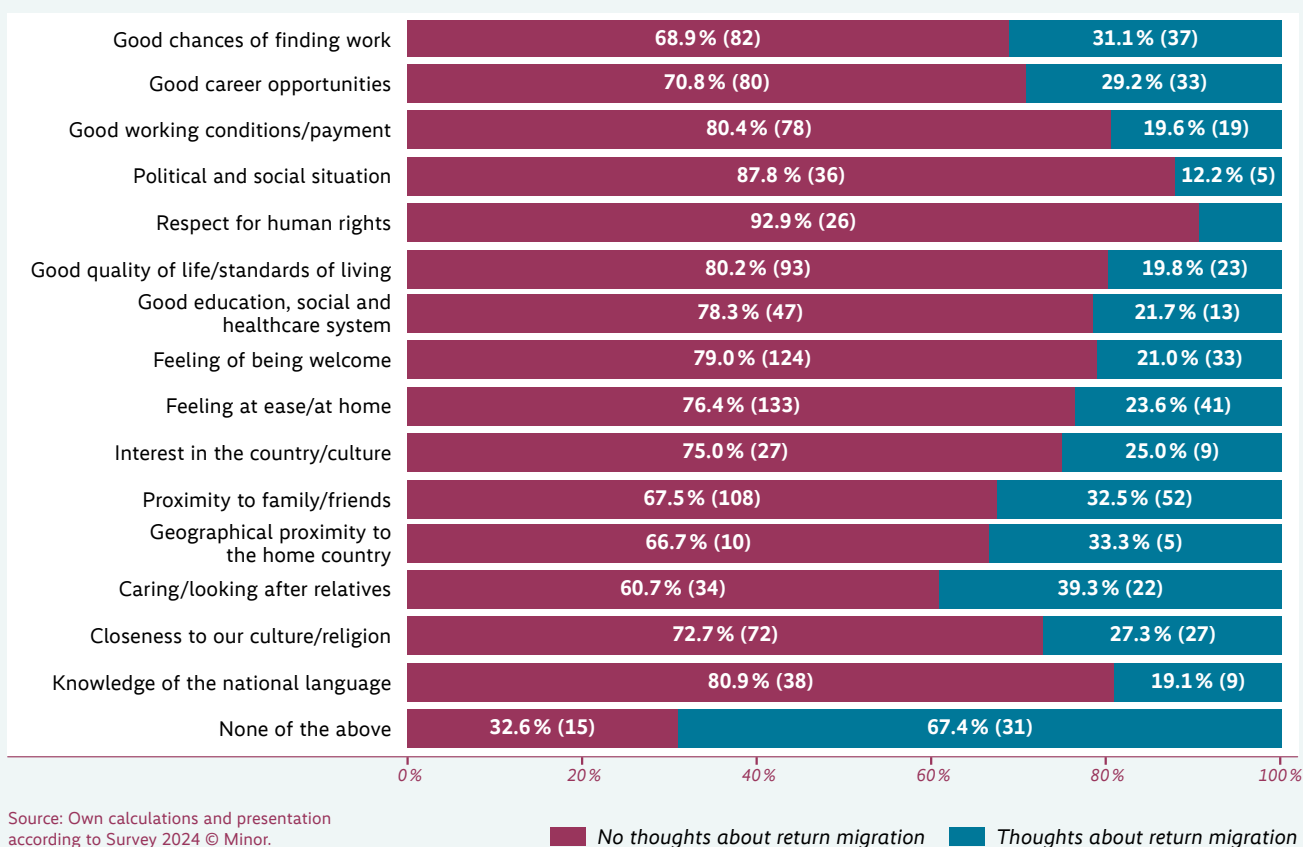
If we differentiate according to the factors that influenced the decision to emigrate to the respective destination country (pull factors) (see Figure 35), it becomes clear that those respondents in particular who indicated that none of the above reasons spoke in favour of emigrating to the respective destination country are thinking about a return to Germany (67.4 percent). This is followed by the motives for emigration "caring for and looking after relatives" and "geographical proximity to the country of origin": 39.9 percent and 33.3 percent of respondents who stated these reasons are weighing up returning to Germany. Thoughts of returning are least pronounced among those who cited respect for human rights and the political and social situation in the new destination country as their reasons for emigration (see Figure 35).

At this point, if we look again at the average number of reasons given for emigration, it becomes clear that particularly those who do not consider returning had on average more reasons against Germany (3.7) and in favour of the respective destination country (4.4) than those who are

Thoughts of returning according to factors contributing to emigration in the destination country

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets

Fig. 35



weighing up returning (on average 2.3 reasons against Germany and 2.5 reasons in favour of the destination country) (without illustration).

In summary, there are clear differences when it comes to considering a return depending on the reasons for emigration from Germany. People who have left Germany due to residence restrictions or unemployment are the most likely to contemplate returning. This willingness is lowest among people, on the other hand, who have returned to their country of origin for family reasons. The refusal to return is especially pronounced among people who have emigrated due to their dissatisfaction with the education, social, or healthcare system. This equally applies to those who perceived the political and social situation in Germany as problematic or did not feel welcome. Experiences of racism and discrimination greatly reinforce this refusal to return.

3.3.3 Thoughts about returning according to satisfaction in Germany or in the current country of residence

Data from the SVR Integration Barometer 2024 shows that immigrants who have a low level of life satisfaction in Germany are more likely to consider emigrating from Germany than those who are satisfied (Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration (SVR) 2024: 33). Our study illustrates

that dissatisfaction with life in Germany also has an impact beyond this and reduces the likelihood of a subsequent return to Germany after emigration.

Attachment to Germany as a factor for return considerations

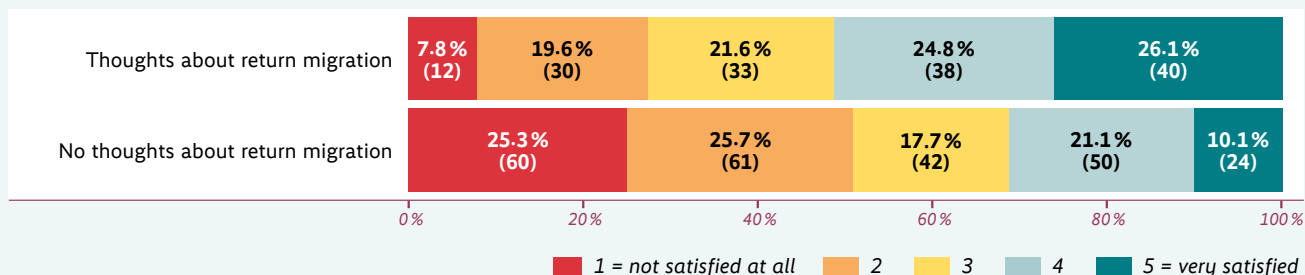
The results of the standardised survey clearly show that respondents who are contemplating returning to Germany have a very different perception of the living situation both in Germany and in their current country of residence to those who refuse to return. More than half of the respondents who would not consider returning to Germany stated that they were either not at all or only slightly satisfied with their social life in Germany. Whereas among those who are considering returning, this figure is only around 28 percent (See Figure 36). The difference between both groups is less pronounced when it comes to job satisfaction, however: 29.7 percent of those who do not plan to return were dissatisfied with working life in Germany, while this proportion is only around two percentage points lower among those interested in returning (27.4 percent) (see Figure 38).

Both groups – respondents with and without thoughts of returning – distinctly differ in their attachment to Germany. Around two-thirds of respondents with thoughts of returning feel (very) attached to Germany. The figure is only 27.8

Satisfaction with social life in Germany according to thoughts about returning

Fig. 36

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets

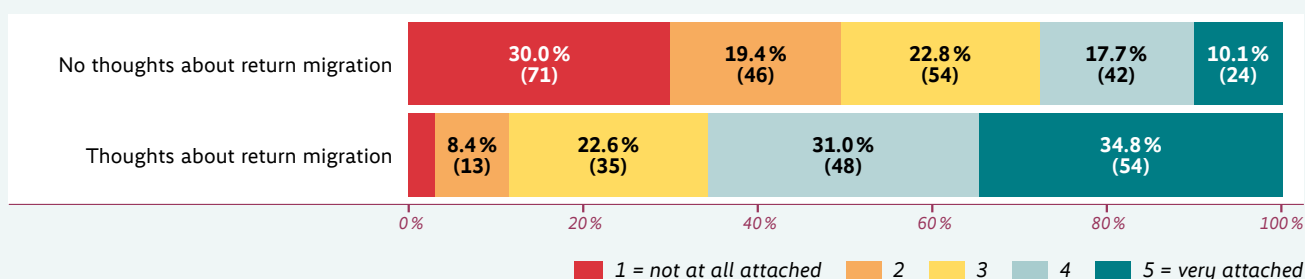


Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

Attachment to Germany according to thoughts about returning*

Fig. 37

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "How strongly attached do you feel to Germany?"

percent for those without thoughts of returning (see Figure 37). It appears that the respondents' perceived attachment to Germany is more strongly characterised by social than economic aspects. This becomes particularly clear when we compare the responses on attachment to Germany with the data on satisfaction with social life in Germany. Respondents who were satisfied with their social life in Germany also feel more strongly connected to Germany. The correlation between perceived attachment and satisfaction with working life in Germany is less clear, however. A close correlation between social satisfaction and perceived attachment to Germany indicates that factors such as family relationships, friendships, and the social environment could play a key role in the assessment. People with strong social ties seem to feel more attached to Germany, regardless of their economic situation.

Dissatisfaction with current social and working life motivates people to return to Germany

Conversely, the results also show that respondents who are (very) satisfied with their social life in the current country of residence less often consider returning to Germany. The same pattern can be observed when it comes to satisfaction

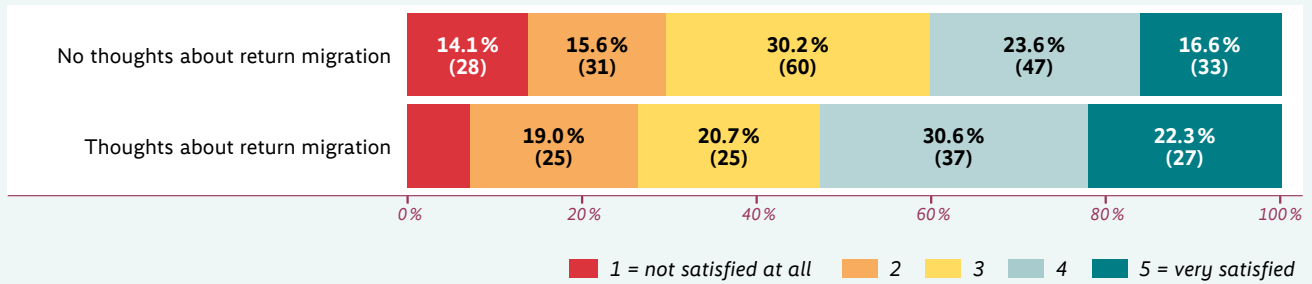
with working life: those who are dissatisfied with their current working life are far more likely to harbour thoughts of returning than those who are satisfied (without illustration). In contrast, the differences in terms of satisfaction with previous working life in Germany are less pronounced (Figure 38). This indicates that previous high satisfaction with working life in Germany is not a particularly strong pull factor for returning to Germany. Rather, dissatisfaction with working life in the current country of residence seems to be a much stronger push factor. In other words: The desire for change is more likely to be motivated by current negative experiences in the country of residence than by previous positive memories of Germany.

The sub-chapter shows that those who contemplate returning to Germany were more satisfied with their work and social life in Germany than those who are not. At the same time, respondents who are dissatisfied with their current social and working life tend to be more willing to return.

Satisfaction with working life in Germany according to thoughts about returning

Fig. 38

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

3.3.4 Reasons, plans, preparations and needs to return

Those who stated that they have toyed with the idea of returning to Germany were asked about their exact plans in a further block of questions. This included the likelihood of returning, the time frame, preparations and support requirements.

In addition to the question about the desire and intention to migrate, the question on the likelihood of returning to Germany affords a further opportunity to more precisely

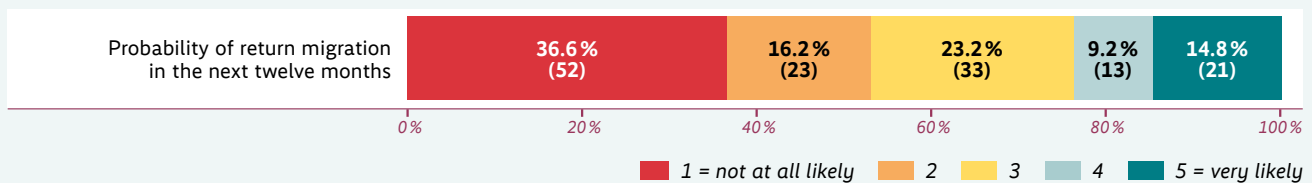
narrow down the actual migration efforts. Only 24 percent of respondents consider it (very) likely that they would return to Germany within the next twelve months. More than half, on the other hand, consider it (very) unlikely.

43.7 percent of those considering returning indicate that they do not yet know how long they want to stay in Germany. 21.8 percent would like to stay forever, 19 percent for more than five years (see Figure 40). The majority of respondents (41.9 percent) would also move to Germany with a partner, 29.1 percent with children, and 35.1 percent alone (see Figure 41).

Probability of returning in the next twelve months*

Fig. 39

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



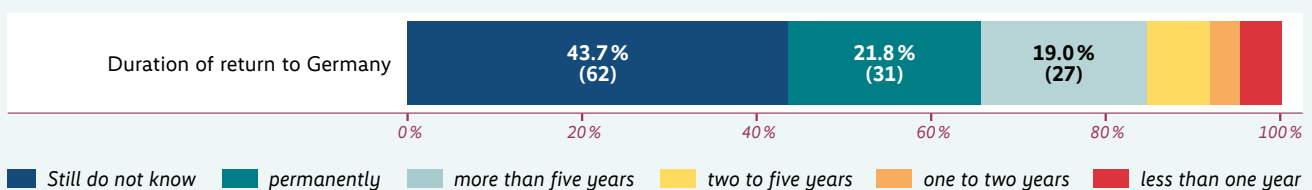
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "How likely is it that you will move to Germany in the next twelve months?"

Duration of return to Germany*

Fig. 40

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



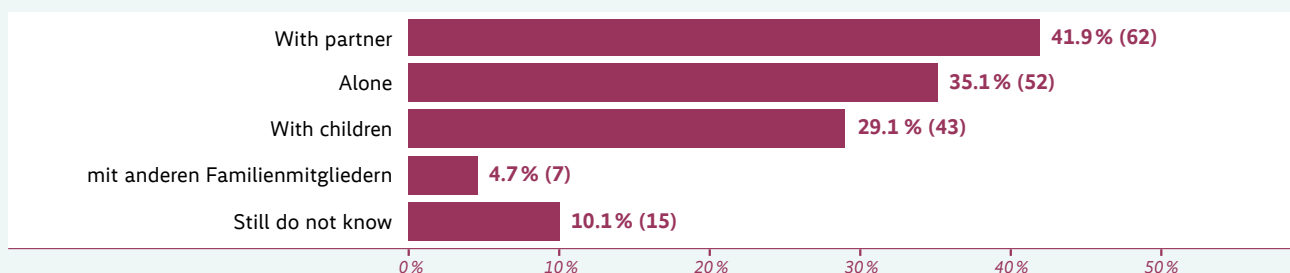
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "How long do you plan to stay in Germany?"

Return migration according to marital status*

Fig. 41

Multiple selections possible, figures in percent, absolute figures in parentheses



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "Do you intend on moving to Germany alone or with family members?"

When asked what preparations the respondents had already made for returning to Germany, 60.1 percent stated that they have not yet taken any concrete steps. Of the remaining almost 40 percent of people with thoughts of returning to Germany, most have either contacted family, acquaintances, or friends in Germany or obtained information on immigration to Germany (14.9 percent in each case). Only a few have already found a job, a place at university or an apprenticeship, as well as accommodation (see Figure 42).

When asked what the reason for returning to Germany is or would be, 28.1 percent of respondents state that a job offer would be a reason. 13 percent cite family reasons. 12.3 percent would return to Germany to look for a job.

When asked where people would like more support/information to realise their return migration, the majority cited finding a job in Germany (46.7 percent). But support is also needed with finding accommodation (30.8 percent) and learning the German language (22.5 percent). 20 percent need support when it comes to financing their stay.

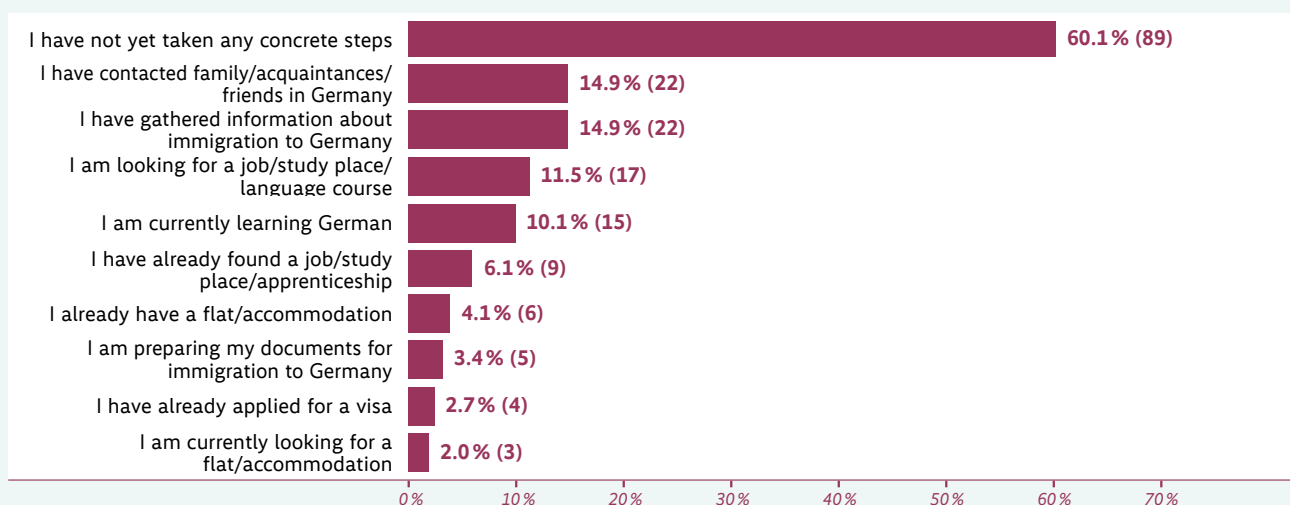
Whereas 20 percent of respondents indicate that they do not need any further support.

Most of the respondents with thoughts of returning obtain information about renewed immigration from friends and acquaintances in Germany, followed by official German government websites such as "Make it in Germany" and social media (29.2 percent).

Preparations made for return migration to Germany*

Fig. 42

Multiple selections possible, figures in percent, absolute figures in brackets



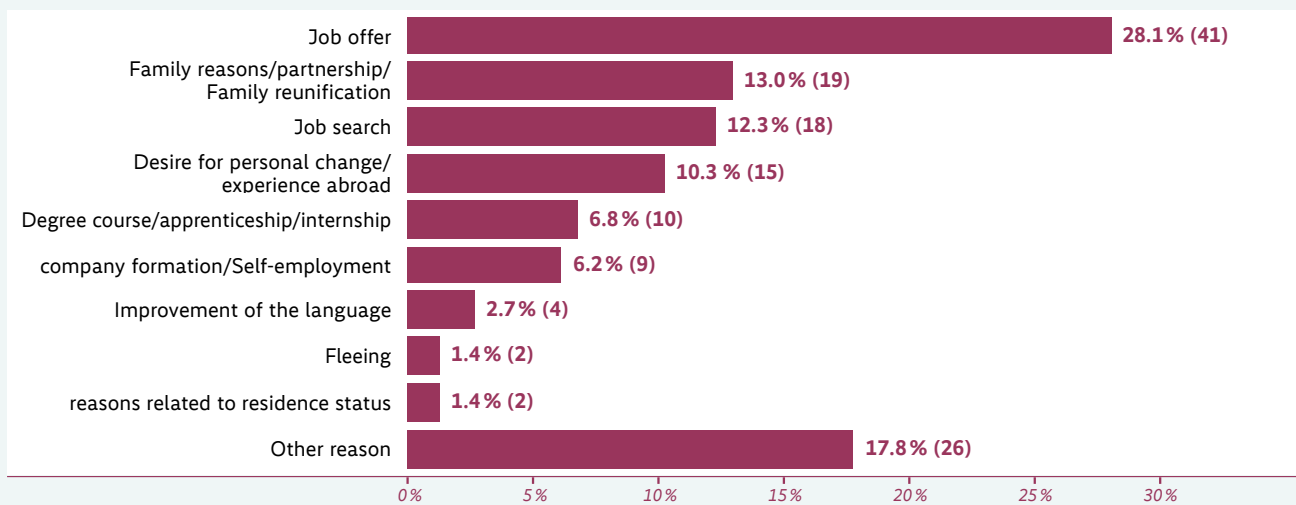
Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "Which of the following preparations have you already made to move to Germany?"

Main reason for return migration to Germany*

Fig. 43

Data in percent, absolute figures in brackets



Source: Own calculations and presentation according to Survey 2024 © Minor.

* Answer to the question: "What is the main reason for returning to Germany?"

Overall, only a few of our respondents have concrete plans to return to Germany. Among the respondents who expressed the idea of returning to Germany, only a very small number expect to actually realise these hypothetical plans in the next twelve months. Almost half cannot say for how long they would return for; most of them have also not yet made any concrete preparations for their return. It is also clear that career opportunities would be the greatest incentive to return, so this factor is also central here. This is also reflected in the need for support – most respondents would like more support when searching for a job, but there is also a need for support in finding accommodation, learning the language and financing their stay. Social contacts play the most important role in providing information about a possible return, which once again underlines the centrality of personal relationships in migration decisions.

4.

Classification of results and approaches

4.1 Key findings on emigration and return migration

The results of the study illustrate that the emigration and possible return of immigrants to Germany are closely linked to their life satisfaction, social integration, and perception of social conditions in Germany as well as in their current country of residence. While economic factors such as labour market opportunities or financial stability play a key role, data shows that the respondents' decision to emigrate and their willingness to return must above all be understood in connection with social aspects – such as a sense of belonging, satisfaction with the social environment and the welcome culture.

Professional and economic factors, in particular career and training opportunities alongside financial security, are central motives for migrating to Germany. On the other hand, psychosocial reasons take a back seat at first, but become increasingly important during the course of the stay and when deciding to emigrate. Particularly striking is the fact that social factors such as integration into society, making contacts and general satisfaction with social life greatly contribute to the assessment of the stay. Many respondents perceive social isolation and a lack of opportunities for connecting with others to be major challenges, which are often subsequently reflected in decisions to emigrate.

Reasons for emigration prove to be complex and multi-faceted. The main reasons for emigration are cited as being job offers abroad and family reasons. As opposed to immigration, which is often linked to specific reasons, emigration is much less event-driven. Instead, psychosocial factors play a prominent role as to why respondents decide to leave Germany: Many report not having felt at ease or welcome and express dissatisfaction with their social life in Germany. Financial and professional reasons such as high living costs and dissatisfaction with working conditions come in second place. In terms of the pull factors in the destination country, the feeling of being welcome and feeling at ease there also initially favours emigration from Germany. Economic reasons such as better working conditions and higher quality of life follow in second place here. The push factors in Germany are accordingly reflected in the pull factors of the target countries.

The survey results show clear differences between those who returned to their country of origin after their stay in Germany and those who moved on to another destination

country. Around two-thirds of respondents returned to their country of origin, whereas the remaining third moved on to a third country. It is striking that the reason for emigrating to a third country, “not feeling at home in Germany”, still plays the most important role, however, work-related reasons – in particular dissatisfaction with working conditions and payment in Germany – are significantly more important than when returning to the country of origin. In the third country, better working conditions and a higher quality of life are pull factors for emigration. Decisions to emigrate to a third country are especially multi-faceted and complex, which is reflected in the fact that on average more reasons for emigration were given here than when returning to the country of origin.

Overall, respondents were far more satisfied with their social life in the new country of residence than in Germany – regardless of whether they had moved to their country of origin or a third country. Nevertheless, the majority of respondents indicate that they would actually have liked to stay longer in Germany; this mainly applies to those who had spent less than two years in Germany, were dissatisfied with their social life in Germany or had left the country due to residence permit hurdles or a lack of career prospects. This attitude is less true for those who cited the above-mentioned psychosocial factors as the reason for emigration.

Despite the overall high level of satisfaction in the new country of residence, many are unsure how long they want to stay in the respective country, which reveals a certain potential for return migration. 39.5 percent of respondents are thinking about returning to Germany. Existing language skills, familiarity with the system and personal ties play a role here. Furthermore, it emerges that people who would have liked to stay longer, but emigrated due to residence permit regulations or temporary study visits, are more likely to consider returning to Germany. Nevertheless, only very few expect to realise these hypothetical plans in the next twelve months. Almost half cannot say for how long they would return for; most of them have also not yet made any concrete preparations for their return. The greatest need for support in the event of an intended return is in the search for work and accommodation. At the same time, psychosocial reasons such as a perceived lack of hospitality, an inadequate welcome culture, experiences of discrimination and bureaucratic obstacles clearly speak against a return. One key finding is that particularly those people who were dissatisfied with their social life in Germany were far less likely to consider returning.

To better classify the findings, it is also important to emphasise that the results presented here afford valuable insights into the reasons for emigration and the experiences of immigrants who have left Germany again. However, they are subject to the proviso that their experiences are not representative of the entirety of people who have emigrated from Germany (see Chapter 2.1). Owing to the survey design, this is not a representative sample. The recruitment method via social media, which favours certain groups, also results in a potential distortion. What's more, the survey is based on the participants' retrospective reports, which could be influenced by memory gaps or altered perceptions. It is particularly worth noting the disproportionate participation of highly qualified individuals whose experiences and motives do not necessarily represent the entire emigrant population (see Chapter 2.2). The findings also only represent a snapshot and could be strongly shaped by the current political, economic, and social context both in Germany and in the destination countries. In light of these limitations, the findings should be viewed as exploratory insights that afford important food for thought, but cannot simply be transferred to the entire emigrant population.

4.2 Classification of results and approaches

The results illustrate that decisions to emigrate extend far beyond economic considerations and are closely tied to social and societal conditions. It shows that although Germany is economically attractive, there are deficits in social interaction and in the welcome culture that may contribute towards emigration in the long term. This raises important questions about German society's openness and ability to integrate.

Therefore, the study provides important insights into current debates on emigration dynamics in Germany, which are conducted in academia, politics, and business. Marcel Fratzscher from the DIW argues, for instance, that the causes of emigration are less to do with the economic attractiveness of other countries such as the US or Switzerland. Instead, he sees the main reasons in the current restrictive German migration policy as well as the underlying social and political developments. These factors, according to Fratzscher, motivate immigrants to leave Germany earlier and look for alternative life prospects abroad, instead of considering Germany as a permanent home. The so-called "re-migration" of immigrants and persons with a migration background has thus long become a reality (Fratzscher 2024). This assessment is supported by other studies. For example, a study by Zajak et al. (2024) demonstrates that due to the electoral success of the AfD and its restrictive

agenda, a significant proportion of people with a migrant background in Germany are at least hypothetically considering emigrating. It is worrying that every tenth respondent already has concrete plans to emigrate.

This study clearly shows that these thoughts of emigration, caused by political and social developments, are not purely hypothetical, but many respondents have long since turned them into reality. The underlying reasons for emigration, such as dissatisfaction with the welcome culture and social conditions in Germany, can be interpreted as a direct consequence of the increasingly restrictive attitude towards immigrants and a political climate in the country that many of the respondents perceive as not very inclusive. These findings should therefore not only be regarded in terms of the economic damage engendered by emigration in view of the existing labour shortage, but also in terms of what they reveal about the social climate and social cohesion in Germany.

The attractiveness of other countries, which are often perceived as the antithesis of Germany, also plays a role in the decision to emigrate. This is clearly reflected in respondents' satisfaction with their social life in Germany compared to their new country of residence. No matter whether the respondents emigrated to their country of origin or a third country, they tend to be more satisfied with their social life than previously in Germany, where social isolation and a lack of opportunities to connect with the German-speaking population are frequently reported. These results thus underline the importance of social participation for the immigrants' well-being and can also be classified in the context of the current debate on the loneliness of people with migration and refugee experiences (Eckhard/Siegert 2024). The BMFSFJ (Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth) loneliness barometer (Schobin et al. 2024) illustrates, for example, that people with experience of migration and flight have a significantly higher level of loneliness than people without these experiences. The authors attribute this to poorer opportunities for participation in social life, experiences of discrimination and difficult access to education and the labour market.

For the latter point, however, it should be borne in mind that the sample in this study primarily consists of highly qualified workers, most of whom, according to their own statements, gained good work experience in Germany. This makes it clear that successful labour market integration²⁰ is not automatically followed by social participation, as is often assumed.²¹ Other factors, such as a lack of acceptance by the host society, can greatly impede social participation. Added to this, highly qualified workers, such as those predominantly reached by the survey, are far more mobile on the global labour market due to their qualifications than,

²⁰ What is more, the working conditions themselves can exacerbate social participation, for instance, when excessive working hours, physically demanding work or low income prevent people from establishing social relationships in Germany (Loschert et al. 2023).

²¹ This assumption is reflected, for example in Esser's classic model (Koch 2018), which describes the four dimensions of migrant integration that are often understood as a sequential process: The first stage is language acquisition, then structural integration in the education system and labour market, followed by social integration and then emotional attachment to the host country.

for instance, people with lower qualifications or refugees who are confronted with residence permit restrictions. Highly qualified people often have better job opportunities, career prospects and entry requirements in other countries. This potentially makes it easier for them when deciding to emigrate to another country if the working or living conditions in their home country do not meet their expectations. Accordingly, in case of grievances in the country of residence, they may more quickly turn to emigration than other groups of immigrants. Having said that, it does not mean that the experiences of other groups are less significant or problematic due to their lack of “exit options”. Rather, they require special attention, as these groups cannot flexibly react to problematic circumstances in the same way.

The survey has shown that people who emigrated to third countries often did so for a combination of several reasons. Dissatisfaction with opportunities for social participation and working conditions, payment or career prospects often occurred together. Professional reasons must therefore not be ignored. Various studies show that immigrants are often far less well paid than their German colleagues (Spitaleri 2022; Plünnecke 2024) – even with the same qualifications and level of employment requirements (Dülken/Shibeshi 2024). Particularly badly paid are workers from the new EU member states, especially Bulgaria and Romania. In the present study, this group of immigrants also express a particularly high dissatisfaction with their social life in Germany, cite the high living costs as a reason for emigration more frequently than average and show the lowest return potential. This is even more alarming given that Germany has been heavily reliant on labour from this region of origin in recent years in order to meet demand on the labour market. This is also problematic in economic terms because the emigrants often take their negative image of Germany back to their countries of origin or new destination countries, which may compromise Germany’s reputation in the long run as an attractive immigration destination.

Despite the reasons for emigration, there is also a significant number of people who consider returning to Germany. This aspect has not yet received the social and political attention it deserves and therefore remains a niche topic. The return of emigrants could bring new perspectives and experiences that are of great importance for social interaction and the German labour market.

The results of this study provide concrete insights into the reality of emigration and the future plans of emigrants. They clearly show that political and social developments have a direct impact on past and future migrations decisions and underline the need for an inclusive and future-oriented migration and labour market policy so as to retain or win back immigrants. An analysis of reasons for emigration affords the opportunity to critically examine structural challenges in Germany. The following fields of action and approaches can be derived from this.

Field of action 1: Emigration prevention

The results of the survey make it clear that many immigrants leave Germany even after years of residence due to inadequate professional and social prospects. In order to slow down and minimise this emigration dynamic, people must be supported to stay in the medium to long term rather than just receiving support upon arrival in Germany. The study also shows that promoting labour market participation alone is not enough, as it does not necessarily and automatically lead to social participation. Dissatisfaction with social life represents a key reason for emigration among the (highly qualified) professionals surveyed here. Social participation must therefore be given equal consideration and actively promoted and supported by policymakers and labour market players from the outset. Only this way can a sense of belonging among immigrants be strengthened, and psychosocial motives for emigration mitigated and the long-term loyalty of immigrants to Germany secured.

This requires the development and establishment of a comprehensive welcome and retention concept that sensitises and involves all relevant actors from politics, business, science and society and is based on a broad range of measures that equally promote the participation of immigrants in the labour market and society. The following specific approaches can be mentioned here, without claiming to be exhaustive:

- The reasons and dynamics of emigration should be further researched by academics over a longer period of time in order to develop a better understanding of the processes, particularly with regard to the heterogeneity of reasons and emigrant groups.
- This understanding can empower and support policymakers (legislators at federal and state level) and labour market players (Federal Employment Agency, employment agencies, job centres, chambers) to develop and establish tailor-made measures and tools to reduce unwanted emigration.
- In addition to labour market aspects, social integration services in particular should be considered by the relevant stakeholders from the outset; such as by providing the necessary support resources for immigrants themselves, but also for their family members and employers in the form of measures, tools, funding programmes and projects.

Field of action 2: Winning back migrants

The emigration figures of official statistics clearly show that many immigrants leave Germany each year. However, this also opens up potential, as the emigrants are people who already have relevant work and life experience in Germany. They can be perceived and addressed as a separate immigration group from a labour market and migration policy perspective. Winning them back could represent a targeted strategy for countering the shortage of skilled labour. According to this survey, just under 40 percent of respondents are thinking about returning to Germany, and especially those who were previously satisfied with their social life in Germany, and those, who have migrated back to their country of origin.

In order to successfully win back immigrants to Germany, the development of a sustainable win-back strategy involving all relevant stakeholders at federal and state level is of crucial importance. As with the examples shown in the first field of action, the following approaches could be mentioned here:

- Observing and researching the professional and social needs of this heterogeneous target group through academic methods so as to develop promising approaches for winning back international labour and skilled workers who have emigrated. Raising political and labour market players' awareness about the particular potential of this group for the German labour market would be a necessary first step.
- On this basis, policymakers (legislators at federal and state level) and labour market actors (Federal Employment Agency, in particular ZAV, EURES and chambers) can be empowered and supported to develop tailor-made measures and instruments to address and support the return of this group to Germany. Foreign chambers of commerce, consulates, information portals such as "Make it in Germany" or employees of the Goethe Institute abroad can also play an important role here.

Our study emphasises that an inclusive environment free from discrimination as well as better support upon arrival and during the stay are key building blocks for a sustainable migration policy. Measures must therefore go beyond purely economic incentives and focus more strongly on social participation in order to shape Germany in the long term as an attractive and inclusive place to live for people with experiences of migration. These measures should not "only" be aimed at immigrant labourers and skilled workers, but should also have a targeted and deliberate focus on the special group of people who have previously lived and worked in Germany.

The development and consolidation of approaches mentioned here into concrete recommendations for action requires further studies and processes, involving all the ac-

tors cited here, as well as other actors such as civil society and immigrant communities. Our study makes an initial contribution towards better understanding the phenomenon of return potential, a topic that previously received little attention and examination, of an ever-growing group of people who have gained experience with the labour market and social life in Germany and have now turned their backs on the country.

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Auf Wiedersehen? Analyse der Daten- und Forschungslage zu Ab- und Rückwanderungsprozessen von Zuwandernden aus/nach Deutschland [Goodbye? Analysis of the data and research situation on emigration and return migration processes from/to Germany]

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Welcome back?

Reasons for emigration and potential for return migration among EU and third-country nationals who have emigrated from Germany

Germany needs skilled labour – however, many who once came here are turning their backs on the country again. What are the reasons for this emigration? Is it better opportunities elsewhere, a lack of prospects here or social hurdles?

One of the issues addressed by the study is why EU and third-country nationals leave Germany again: In addition to professional and economic factors, social integration, bureaucratic hurdles, and the sense of belonging play a decisive role.

Those who want to strengthen Germany as a country of immigration not only need to recruit new labour and skilled workers, but should also focus on those who have already lived here as a target group. “Welcome back?” provides valuable insights for politics, business and society – and shows how Germany can become more attractive for immigrants in the long term.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

➔ fes.de/themenportal-flucht-migration-integration/abwanderung-fachkraefte-deutschland