



Between Freedom of Movement and Exclusion:

EU Labour Migration to Germany:
a Concise Overview

Introduction

Migration within the European Union has shaped the German labour market for years. Nevertheless, the living and working conditions of mobile EU citizens are often overlooked in political debates. This publication provides a concise overview of key developments, challenges and areas for political action.

Key findings:

- EU citizens account for around 30 percent of all migrants in Germany, yet they often remain invisible in both politics and the public sphere.
- Despite formal equality, they are frequently underemployed and earn significantly less than German workers.
- Linguistic, institutional and structural barriers prevent them from securing employment adequate for their qualifications.
- Limited access to social benefits increases the risk of precarity – particularly in seasonal and agency work.
- For the first time, Germany has recorded negative net migration figures for EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe.
- Cross-border commuters are a key but vulnerable workforce – particularly in Eastern Germany.
- Improved working and living conditions could encourage skilled workers to remain in Germany over the long term and reduce emigration.

Definition: EU citizenship

EU citizenship is a legal status to which all persons holding the nationality of an EU Member State are entitled (Art. 20 TFEU). It guarantees freedom of movement, equal treatment, access to the labour market, and social and political participation rights.

However, the data in this document show that, in practice, these rights are often not fully upheld.

General figures on immigration from the EU to Germany

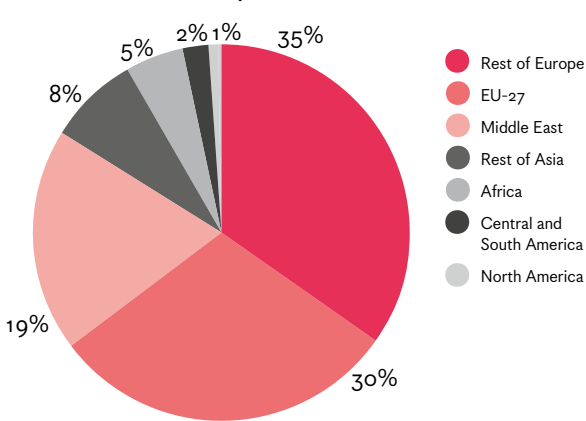
Migration is a perennial topic in Germany. However one group that is rarely discussed in this context is migrants from other Member States of the European Union. They account for around 30 percent of migrants in Germany. By the end of 2024 a total of 5.05 million EU nationals were living in Germany. This meant that they accounted for six percent of the population living in Germany.¹

Of the 25.2 million people with a migration background in Germany, 7.5 million have direct family ties to an EU Member State – equal to one in every eleven residents of Germany.²

Under the EU Freedom of Movement Act, EU citizens can enter Germany without a visa and settle here. Legally, they are treated on an equal footing with German workers. However, it is often overlooked that, just like many immigrants from non-EU countries, they face various barriers in the labour market and in their everyday lives.

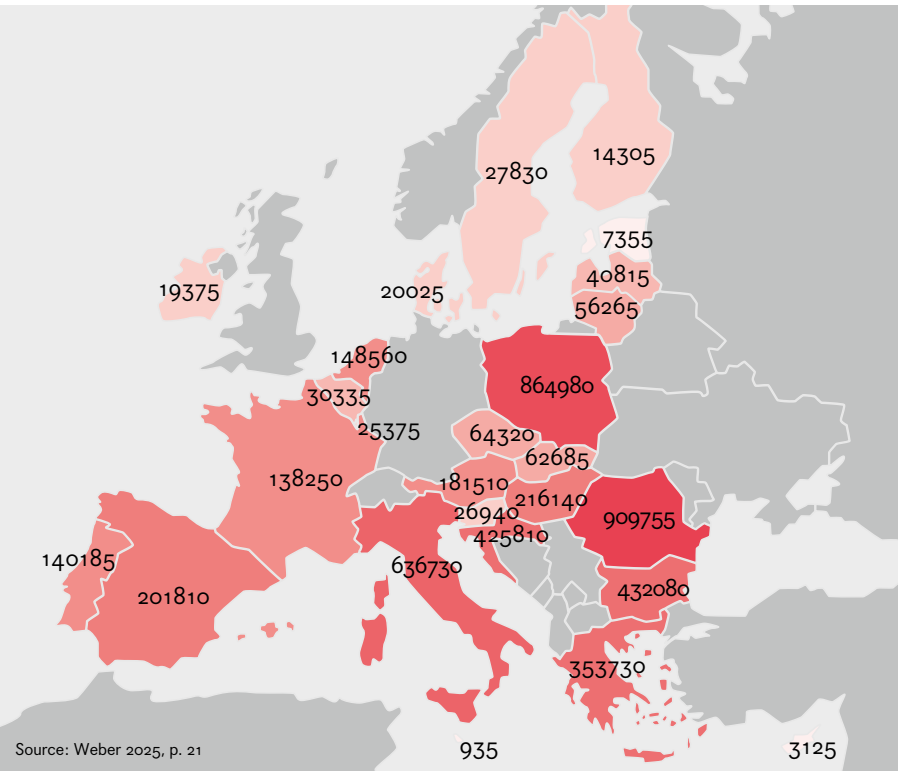
01

Migration to Germany from different regions of the world in 2024³



02

Number of non-German EU citizens residing in Germany on December 31 2024⁴



Top 3 countries of origin in 2024:

- 1 Rumania (138,135)
- 2 Poland (62,650)
- 3 Bulgaria (41,775)

Sociodemographics:

- Proportion of women: 37% of all immigrants
- Youngest age group dominates: Most immigrants aged 16–35

¹ Weber 2025
² Mediendienst Integration 2025
³ Destatis 2025
⁴ Weber 2025

Labour market integration of EU citizens

- 5 Weber 2025
- 6 Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2025a
- 7 Destatis 2024
- 8 Plünnecke 2024
- 9 Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024
- 10 Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2025b (illustration by author)

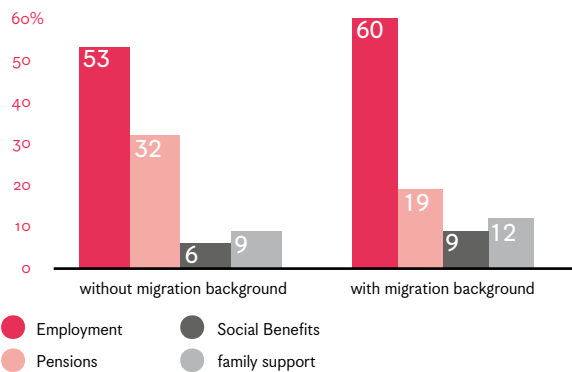
EU citizens are well integrated into the labour market in Germany: they are generally well-educated and in employment subject to social insurance contributions. They derive most of their income from work, pensions and family support.

Nevertheless, EU citizens often work in jobs far below their qualification level. As a result, the median wage for this group is significantly below that of other migrant groups in Germany and below the median wage for society as a whole. They are also more frequently affected by short-term and agency work, as well as fixed-term employment contracts.

This is due, among other things, to a lack of language courses, stereotypes within the public employment service, implicit discrimination in job advertisements, or the above-average proportion of precarious employment arrangements such as seasonal work. At the same time, EU citizens are excluded from most social benefits for up to five years after their arrival.

03

Main source of income by migration background 2023⁷



The lowest median net income in 2023 among EU citizens in Germany affects citizens from:

- Bulgaria: €2,520
- Romania: €2,611

By comparison, German full-time employees earn a median of €3,945.⁸

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Employment Rates¹⁰

Nationality	Employment rate	Employment rate (SvB, employment subject to social security contributions)	Unemployment rate	SGB II (Book II of the social code, unemployment benefit) rate	ELB (employable person eligible for citizen's benefit, "Bürgergeld") rate
Total	67,8	62,2	7	8,2	7,1
German	70,9	65,3	5,3	5,3	4,7
EU Member states	62,9	58,4	8,5	8,9	7,3
EU eastern enlargement (EU-11)	66,2	61,4	8,5	9,7	7,9

SvB = Employees subject to social insurance contributions, ELB = Beneficiaries of benefits who are capable of work

GENERAL

2.56 million EU citizens in Germany are in employment subject to social insurance contributions (2024)
Men: 58%
Women: 42%
Without vocational qualifications: 22%
Recognised qualifications: 35%
Academic qualifications: 14%⁵

Sector breakdown:

Manufacturing: 29.1%
Services: 69.5%
Agriculture: 1.4%
Highest EU share: in metal/electrical, transport, retail and hospitality⁶

Problems for companies when recruiting foreign skilled workers (general, not EU-specific)⁹

Most common reasons for not hiring foreign skilled workers:

- 1 Language barriers 63.5%
- 2 Misconceptions on the part of applicants 45.3%
- 3 Difficulty in assessing qualifications 40.8%
- 4 There are enough domestic skilled workers 23.9%
- 5 Bureaucratic hurdles 22.1%

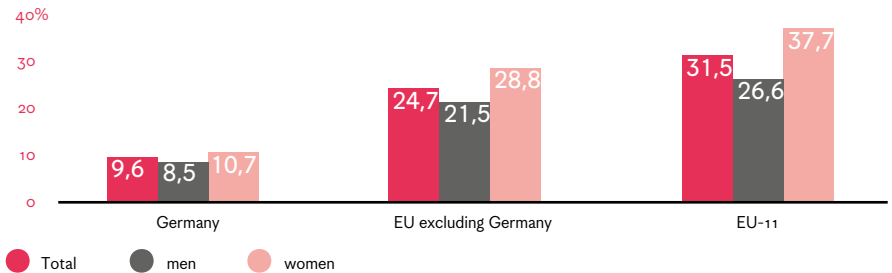
Exclusions and barriers in the German labour market

11 Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2024
12 DGB-Index Gute Arbeit 2024
13 Antidiskriminierungsstelle des Bundes 2018
14 Brüssig et al. 2017
15 SVR Integration und Migration 2023
16 BAMF / Gleichbehandlungsstelle EU-Arbeitnehmer 2025
17 Afscharian et al. 2024

Although the legal framework for EU citizens in the labour market is the same as for Germans, they do not have the same opportunities as their German competitors. They are more frequently placed in agency, short-term and fixed-term employment contracts, or work at an unskilled level ('helper level') – despite having vocational training or an academic qualification.

05

Workers from (Central) Eastern Europe are frequently underemployed – particularly women¹¹



Example:
Of all women employed subject to social insurance contributions (excluding apprentices) from EU-11 states with a recognised vocational qualification or academic degree, 37,7% work in roles at the 'assistant' skill level.
EU-11: Bulgaria, Estonia, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic.

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Prevalence of casual, agency and shift work, fixed-term contracts¹²

(only employees who have sufficient knowledge of German and a telephone line with a German area code)

	No migration background	Parents immigrated from the EEA (European Economic Area)	Migrated from the EEA themselves
Prevalence of unskilled work	18%	17%	25%
Prevalence of agency work	2%	6%	3%
Prevalence of shift work	12%	18%	12%
Prevalence of fixed-term employment contracts	5%	15%	10%

Barriers in the German labour market

Job vacancies

Around 21.2 percent of the job advertisements carry a risk of discrimination. In some cases, native-level German is required, even though it is not necessary for the job.¹³

Stereotypes in public employment services

In public employment services, certain jobs are sometimes allocated to people on the basis of stereotypes or to meet quotas (e.g. migrant women in care roles).¹⁴

Recognition of qualifications

In Germany, 81 professions are subject to regulation. In order to practice these as an EU citizen, the qualification obtained within the EU must first be recognized. Only seven professions, including healthcare professions, are recognized automatically.¹⁵

Language courses

German is often required as the working language. However, EU citizens are not entitled to integration courses (A1-B1). Instead, these can only be attended following an application to the BAMF and in the case of sufficient capacity by the course providers. These courses are not free: for 700 standard class hours, a total student contribution of 1,365.00 euros is required. If the course is completed successfully in less than two years, half of the amount may, under specific circumstances, be refunded.¹⁶

Exclusion from social benefits:

The EU Citizenship Directive (2004/38/EC) states that 'economically inactive' EU citizens may be excluded from social benefits for up to five years.

In Germany, the following applies: after a stay of more than three months in Germany, EU citizens must prove that they are in employment or seeking work, or that they have sufficient financial means to cover their basic living expenses. Only temporary benefits ensure a minimum subsistence level in an emergency, but these are significantly lower than regular social security benefits.¹⁷

Seasonal work in agriculture

In 2023, there were 876,000 people employed in agriculture across Germany, of whom 242,800 were seasonal workers from the EU – that is 28 percent of the workforce. However, there are significant regional differences: in Hamburg and Rhineland-Palatinate, around 49 percent of workers were seasonal, whilst in Bremen and Berlin only around 8 to 9 percent were employed as seasonal workers. Overall, the number of seasonal workers has been declining slightly since the start of the COVID-19-pandemic.

Due to their typically short stays in Germany, ranging from a few weeks to several months, seasonal workers face specific problems and exploitation.¹⁸

¹⁸ Barthel / Lluís 2024



- Limited health insurance coverage (only basic medical services are covered under a private group insurance plan)



- Costs often lack transparency: expenses for transport, accommodation and meals as well as taxes and insurance costs are deducted from wages, without being clarified in advance.



- Workers are sometimes unlawfully employed on short-term contracts, even though this work effectively constitutes their main source of income. This results in low social security contributions and correspondingly low entitlements.



- Seasonal workers have a low level of organisation. Trade unions and works councils in this sector are barely available or hardly reach workers, if they exist at all. Annual membership of the relevant trade union, called IG BAU in Germany, is rarely taken up. Consequently, we can see poor worker representation and a lack of information about rights.



- Some of the accommodation is substandard, being rented out at overpriced rates despite poor hygiene conditions.



- The concept of 'social conditionality' is intended to ensure certain minimum standards in agriculture by withdrawing subsidies from farmers who breach them. However, special crops such as asparagus and strawberries generally receive hardly any subsidies.

Intentions to emigrate among EU citizens

24.4 percent of working-age people with personal experience of migration are EU citizens. This group is the most likely to consider leaving Germany again:

- 20.1 percent of these EU citizens intend to stay temporarily
- 31.3 percent are considering emigration
- 5.4 percent have concrete plans to emigrate (the highest proportion among all residence status groups).¹⁹

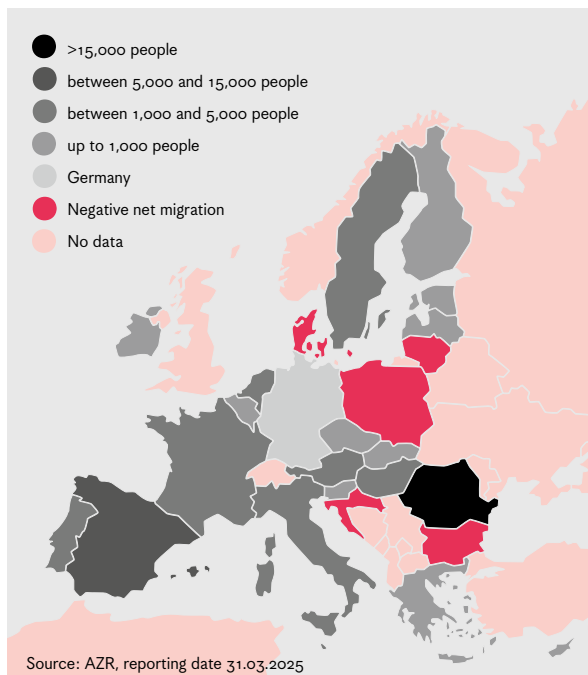
07

¹⁹ Kosyakova et al. 2025

²⁰ Weber 2025

²¹ Kosyakova et al. 2025

Net migration of non-German EU citizens in 2024²⁰



Top reasons to emigrate:

- Tax burden
- Complex bureaucracy
- General economic situation in Germany
- Political situation in Germany

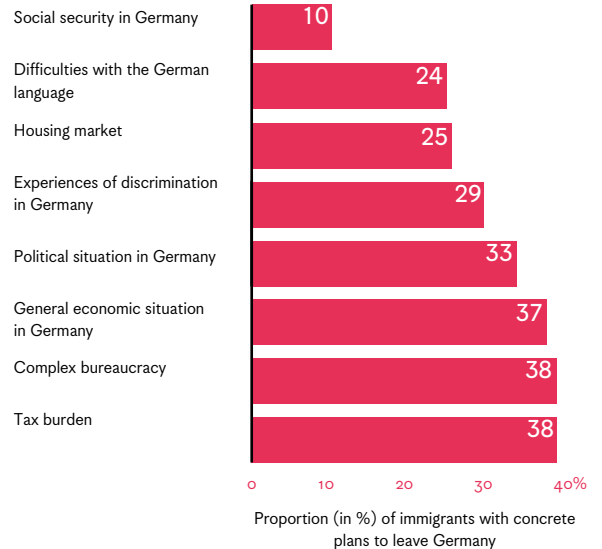
For the first time, Germany has recorded a net loss of EU citizens from Central and Eastern Europe. 33 percent of them cite the political situation in Germany as a reason for emigration. Other reasons include economic, bureaucratic and tax-related factors. These could be mitigated through political will and intervention. Given the shortage of skilled workers and labour, there is great potential here to retain not only well-qualified workers but also those employed in sectors such as agriculture.

(Personal reasons, such as family, friendship or individual life choices were not considered here.)

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Reasons for leaving Germany²¹

REASONS



Emigration

Return migration to home country:

- Mainly to countries such as Poland, Romania and Bulgaria.

Onward migration:

- Mainly to countries such as Switzerland, the USA or Spain.
- Reasons mainly include economic opportunities.

Cross-border commuters as an overlooked workforce

²² Seibert 2024

²³ Verordnung (EG) Nr. 883/2004

²⁴ Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2025c

²⁵ Seibert 2024

Alongside settled migrants from the EU, so-called cross-border commuters also constitute an important workforce within the German labour market.

This is particularly true for Germany's border regions. Cross-border commuters are those who are resident in one EU Member State but work in another one and return home regularly – daily or weekly. Although cross-border commuters make up only a small proportion of the workforce in Germany, they make an important contribution to the German economy, particularly in addressing the shortage of skilled workers in sparsely populated regions. The number of cross-border commuters from (Central) Eastern European countries has been rising steadily for years.²²

The term 'cross-border worker' originates from the social security legislation of the European Union.



A cross-border worker is any person who works in one Member State and lives in another Member State, to which they usually return daily or at least once a week.²³

239,000

this is how many cross-border commuters were working in Germany in 2024

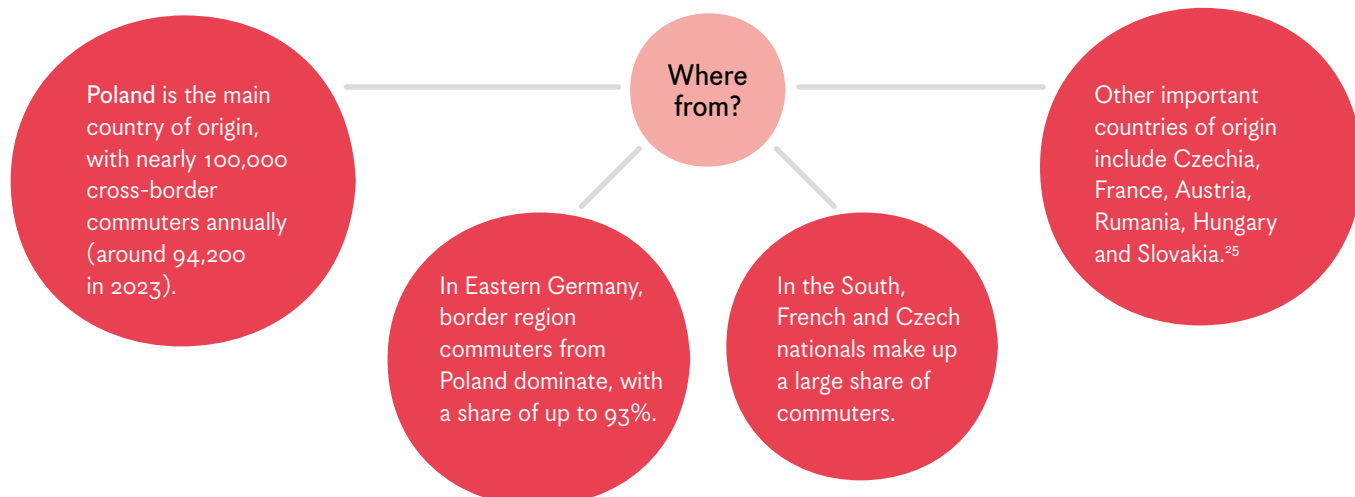
0.7%

foreign cross-border commuters – a small but significant proportion of the German workforce

0.6% in Western Germany

vs 1.2% in Eastern Germany

The proportion of foreign cross-border commuters among all employees subject to social insurance contributions in Eastern Germany is twice as high as in Western Germany.²⁴



Key employment sectors, problems and challenges for cross-border commuters

²⁶ Seibert 2024
²⁷ Ibid.
²⁸ IHK Ostbrandenburg 2020
²⁹ Kozłowska 2025
³⁰ Deffner / Neuser 2024

Cross-border commuters vary greatly in their occupations depending on their region of origin.

Western Europe:→ approx. 25% work in specialist or expert roles.

Eastern Europe:→ only 1% are employed in such roles.

The majority of (Central) Eastern European commuters are employed in support roles, whereas this form of employment is significantly less common among Western European commuters.²⁶

Top occupations of cross-border commuters by region of origin in 2023

Western Europe	(Central) Eastern Europe
1. Mechanical and vehicle engineering occupations (4,039)	1. Operators of vehicles and transport equipment (42,398)
2. Transport and logistics – excluding vehicle operation (3,058)	2. Transport and logistics – excluding vehicle operation (15,963)
3. Metal production, processing, and construction (2,449)	3. Mechanical and vehicle engineering occupations (8,343)

Cross-border commuters as a vulnerable workforce

Cross-border commuting only works if borders are open and workers can move freely. Since 1 May 2011, full freedom of movement for workers has applied to employees from the (Central) Eastern European EU Member States. As a result, the absolute number of cross-border commuters and their share of total employment has risen steadily. However, the frequent border closures in recent years have regularly disrupted commuting and thereby made it considerably more difficult for cross-border commuters to work.²⁷

The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic clearly demonstrated how vulnerable cross-border labour mobility is.

Restrictions:

Border closures and mandatory quarantine made daily commuting virtually impossible for workers from the German-Polish border region.

Strain on infrastructure:

Motorways and local public transport were severely overcrowded; at times, there was a risk of traffic jams stretching for miles and a complete breakdown in traffic flow.

Support measures:

Brandenburg introduced lump-sum payments to cover accommodation and meals for affected cross-border commuters.²⁸

Border closure – May 2025

Time loss and stress:

With increased controls, commuters could expect hours of traffic jams and delays.

The local population in border regions, e.g. in the German-Polish border town of Görlitz/Zgorzelec, was severely restricted by the frequent traffic jams, which hampered daily life and even municipal provisions such as emergency services.²⁹

Consequences?

The enforced interruption of commuter traffic leads to an abrupt loss of routines and mobility options. For cross-border commuters, the familiar transition between private and professional life breaks down – their entire daily routine is thrown out of balance by border closures and controls.³⁰

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About the Polish Social Council e.V.

The Polish Social Council (Polnischer Sozialrat e.V., PSR) is a migrant self-help organization active throughout Germany. In particular, the association brings the perspectives of EU citizens into political, expert and public debates. A key focus of the work is on [equal opportunities](#), [labour market integration](#) and [raising awareness for experiences of discrimination](#), including in the context of EU migration, cross-border commuting and anti-Slavism.

About the project: "Kooperationsverbund für Vielfalt und Zusammenhalt"

This brochure was produced as part of the [Kooperationsverbund für Vielfalt und Zusammenhalt – Chancengerechtigkeit in der pluralen Gesellschaft](#) (Competence Network for Diversity and Cohesion – Equal Opportunities in a Pluralistic Society). The network aims to systematically incorporate migrant perspectives into [mainstream structures](#), policy debates and social negotiation processes.

The Kompetenzverbund brings together the expertise of migrant organisations, active across Germany, promotes [knowledge transfer](#), [networking](#) and [quality development](#), and strengthens democratic participation and equal opportunities in a diverse society.

<https://vielfalt-und-zusammenhalt.de/>

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