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‘[You Are German] When You no Longer Stick Out’: The Meaning of Being German From the Perspective of Germans With and Without a Migrant Background

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ABSTRACT

While several quantitative studies have examined civic and ethno-cultural notions of nationhood among German citizens, the meaning of being German in general and the ambiguities of the term in particular have remained underexplored. Furthermore, this line of scholarship has examined German citizens but has neglected the perspective of Germans with a migrant background. Drawing on six focus group discussions conducted in Germany in 2023, we explore the meaning of being German from the perspective of Germans with and without a migration background. Our findings show that Germans with a migrant background distinguish between achievable criteria, which they believe should be fulfilled in order to *be* German, and ethno-cultural criteria, which they believe should be met in order to be *regarded* as German. In contrast, Germans without a migrant background agreed on achievable criteria at first glance but added other criteria that went beyond these ‘minimal requirements’ to be German. Overall, our exploratory study calls for a thorough consideration of the perspective of citizens with a migrant background in scholarship on German nationhood, as they constitute a growing part of the German population.

1 | Introduction

In scholarship on German identity, several quantitative studies have examined the endorsement of civic and ethnic or ethno-cultural notions of nationhood among German citizens (e.g., Lindstam et al. 2021; Mader et al. 2021; for an overview, see Piwoni and Mußotter 2023). In so doing, scholars usually employ an item battery asking respondents for ‘[...] things [that] are important for being [...] German’. For instance, ethno-cultural criteria are measured by items referring to the importance of having German ancestors, whereas civic criteria are measured by items referring to the importance of having democratic convictions (e.g., Lindstam et al. 2021; Filsinger et al. 2021). Overall, previous research has found that a ‘substantial share of the German public (36/42 per cent) embraces both ethno-cultural

and civic norms’ (Lindstam et al. 2021: 96f). Similarly, Dittmann and Kopf-Beck (2019) demonstrated that being German can mean very different things to different people, ranging from criteria such as German language skills and adherence to a ‘German’ culture over possession of German citizenship to the support of democracy.

In this paper, we take these findings of the quantitative scholarship on German nationhood as a point of departure to further explore various *meanings* of being German as expressed by ‘ordinary’ Germans. We specifically focus on ambiguities such as the simultaneous endorsement of ethno-cultural and civic criteria. In addition, quantitative studies have focused on the perspective of Germans without a migrant background but have neglected the notions of Germans with a migrant background,

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who are defined as ‘people who were born without German citizenship and/or have at least one parent who was not born a German citizen’ (German Federal Statistical Office 2022; for a critique of the term, see, e.g., Will 2019). For instance, while 15% of the participants of Ditlmann and Kopf-Beck’s (2019) study were Germans with migrant backgrounds, the researchers did not provide information as to whether their findings differed for Germans with and without such backgrounds. However, qualitative research on belonging (e.g., Holtz et al. 2013; Moffit et al. 2018) has shown that Germans with Turkish backgrounds, as opposed to ‘White Germans’, feel that being German means having German ancestry and having a certain appearance. Thus, it is important to consider the perspectives of Germans with a migrant background when examining the meaning of being German.

Studying people with migrant backgrounds is of both academic and societal relevance, as they constitute a growing section of the German population. Today, Germany is an immigrant country: 29.7% of the German population (24.9 million) have migrant backgrounds, 49.8% of whom possess German citizenship (German Federal Statistical Office 2024). Often discussed in the literature as the typical model of an ethnic nation (i.e., a community based on a common descent; e.g., Brubaker 2009; Koopmans 1999), Germany has, in recent decades, adopted a predominantly civic understanding of nationhood in public discourse (e.g., Piwoni 2012; Ditlmann and Kopf-Beck 2019). However, with the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, many of whose members openly espouse a *völkisch* conception of the German nation, ethnic notions of nationhood have far from disappeared.

This study makes two major contributions to the literature. First, by conducting six focus group discussions in Germany in 2023, we thoroughly explored which aspects are considered important in order to be German. In contrast to a recent publication that examined the meaning of three different terms such as ‘German people’ that are used in quantitative scholarship on the nationalism-patriotism distinction (Mußotter and Piwoni 2025), we provide qualitative evidence on the meaning of being German. In so doing, we not only advance the literature on the civic–ethnic distinction (e.g., Lindstam et al. 2021) but also contribute to the large scholarship on boundary drawing and boundary perceptions (e.g., Simonsen 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Bilodeau and Simonsen 2025; Bloemraad 2022) by tackling ‘the question of who can be counted as part of our community’ (Simonsen 2018a: 118). Second, this study is, to the best of our knowledge, the first to systematically compare conceptions of German nationhood of Germans with and without migrant backgrounds. Put differently, we seek to explore the meaning of being German from the perspective of these two groups. Our interviewees with migrant backgrounds mainly represent the three biggest immigrant groups in Germany, i.e., people with migrant backgrounds from the former Soviet Union (4.5 million, of whom 2.83 million hold German citizenship), who constitute the largest immigrant group, followed by those with Turkish migrant backgrounds (2.9 million, of whom 1.58 million hold German citizenship) and Polish migrant backgrounds (2.19 million, of whom 1.45 million hold with German citizenship) (German Federal Statistical Office 2024).

This article is organized as follows. First, literature is presented on national belonging, i.e., research on boundary drawing and on the civic–ethnic dichotomy. Second, the six focus group discussions are analysed and the results reported. The findings are then discussed and suggestions are made for future research on German nationhood.

2 | Literature on National Belonging

Surveying the scholarship on national belonging, one can differentiate between studies that include citizens with a migrant background and those that only include citizens without a migrant background or do not differentiate between respondents who have a migrant background and those who do not.

The first group of studies often draws on the concept of ‘symbolic boundaries’, defined as ‘conceptual distinctions that we make to categorize objects, people, practices and even time and space’ (Lamont 1992: 2). These studies seek to determine how people define membership in a nation (e.g., Simonsen 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Bloemraad 2022; Bail 2008). For instance, Simonsen (2018a) conducted in-depth interviews with 20 second-generation immigrants with Muslim backgrounds in Denmark and explored how strongly they felt that they belonged to Denmark. In other words, she examined ‘second-generation immigrants’ ideas about what includes and excludes them from being part of the nation’ (Simonsen 2018a: 121). Given their unambiguous markers of difference, such as a ‘non-Danish appearance’ or speaking Danish with an accent, she found that the interviewees still face an exclusionary and ‘bright boundary’ (Alba 2005). In short, though being born in Denmark and considering Denmark their home, they are not regarded as full members of Danish society and therefore have ambivalent feelings of belonging. Against this backdrop, she introduced the distinction between *belonging in* and *belonging with*: while Danish citizens with a migrant background feel that they belong in Denmark, they do not necessarily feel that they belong with the Danish people.

Likewise, in the United States, Bloemraad (2022; see also Schildkraut 2007, 2014) asked three different groups of immigrant-origin US citizens what it ‘means to be an American’. Conducting semi-structured interviews with 97 immigrant-origin families, she found that being American means having a certain appearance (pale skin, blond hair), a certain culture that is different from those of immigrant-origin citizens, and speaking accent-free English. The interviewees perceived ‘exclusionary criteria of race, economic situation, or cultural fit’ (Bloemraad 2022: 1029) as important. In contrast to ethnic US Americans, they indicated that they did not ‘[enjoy] unquestioned inclusion [but rather felt the need] to use particular behavior to advance claims of membership’ (Bloemraad 2022: 1029). Consequently, they felt ‘excluded from the core of Americanness’ (Bloemraad 2022: 1030).

Similarly, drawing on five focus groups with German Muslims, Holtz et al. (2013) showed that the participants believed that being German means having a certain look (i.e., a certain skin colour and hair colour), which hints at having German ancestry. German Muslims with their ‘easily recognizable features like black hair or a dark complexion’ consequently do not feel

accepted as 'being German' (Holtz et al. 2013: 240). Conducting eight narrative interviews, Moffit et al. (2018) substantiated these findings. They showed that '[t]o be German [...] means having German ancestry' (Moffit et al. 2018: 884). In contrast to Germans with Turkish descent, the 'Germanness [of White] Germans was not viewed as being in question' (Moffit et al. 2018: 886). The authors concluded that 'being German means being a White, non-Muslim native German speaker' (Moffit et al. 2018: 891).

Overall, these studies showed that citizens with a migrant background, including those who were born in the respective country, are faced with boundaries and are thus not considered full members of their nation.

Second, some studies almost exclusively focus on citizens without a migrant background or do not differentiate between citizens with or without a migrant background. These studies often draw on the civic–ethnic distinction (CED) to approach the question of who belongs and what kind of criteria are important to be a (full) member of a nation. Dating back to seminal works in nationalism studies, especially to Kohn's (1944, 1994) studies on the distinction between Western and non-Western (i.e., Eastern) nationalism, the civic–ethnic dichotomy is one of the most predominant lines of (quantitative) research on national attachment (for an overview, see Piwoni and Mußotter 2023). There is a broad consensus that the 'civic nation' is a 'community of equal, rights-bearing citizens, united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values' (Ignatieff 1993: 3–4), whereas the 'ethnic nation' is characterized by 'the people's preexisting ethnic characteristics: their language, religion, customs, and traditions' (Ignatieff 1993: 4). Following substantial criticism, both conceptual and empirical (e.g., Kuzio 2002; Yack 1996; Brubaker 1999), the CED has been developed over time and is now often seen as both an ideal–typical distinction and a valuable heuristic to interpret empirically existing conceptions of nationhood (see further Piwoni and Mußotter 2023).

Scholars usually draw on the following item-battery of the International Social Survey Programme to measure civic and ethnic/ethno-cultural¹ notions of nationhood: 'Some people say that the following things are important for being truly [nationality]. Others say they are not important. How important do you think each of the following is [...]'. Eight criteria are probed: being born in the country, having legal citizenship status, having lived in the country for most of one's life, speaking the dominant language, adhering to the dominant religion, respecting the laws, feeling a member of the community, and having ancestors from that country. While an ethnic/ethno-cultural notion of nationhood is commonly operationalised by items such as the importance of having national ancestry or having been born in Germany, a civic notion of nationhood is usually measured by items such as the importance of having democratic convictions or treating all society's groups equally (e.g., Lindstam et al. 2021; Mader et al. 2021; Filsinger et al. 2021; see further Piwoni and Mußotter 2023). In contrast to referring to ancestry, which is seen as one of the 'most unambiguous indicators' of an ethno-cultural conception of nationhood (Kunovich 2009: 580), items such as the importance of language skills are less clear, as they were used for both ethnic/ethno-cultural (e.g., Jones and Smith 2001; Filsinger et al. 2021)² and civic conceptions of nationhood (e.g.,

Helbling et al. 2016; Kunovich 2009). In previous research, scholars have assessed not only respondents' notions of nationhood, but also their implications on other attitudes such as the support for refugees (e.g., Lindstam et al. 2021). They found that respondents holding a more ethnic/ethno-cultural notion of nationhood are less likely to support refugees, while those with a more civic notion of nationhood are more likely to support them. In addition, they showed that respondents endorsing both ethnic/ethno-cultural and civic notions of nationhood have more ambivalent attitudes towards refugees (Lindstam et al. 2021). Notably, they also demonstrated that a 'substantial share of the German public (36/42 per cent) embraces both ethno-cultural and civic norms [and that] it seems quite likely that many individuals understand national membership both as a function of sharing deep cultural and ancestral traits and ascribing to certain civic norms and values' (Lindstam et al. 2021: 96f).

Building upon the literature on the CED, Ditzmann and Kopf-Beck (2019) examined the meaning of being German, conducting a mixed-methods study with over 900 Germans. Running a latent class analysis, they found four different classes. The largest class (39%) was called the 'heritage-based identity class with a strong focus on language and culture', and the second largest class (26%) was in favour of a 'legal-formalistic national identity', stressing the need for legal requirements for obtaining German citizenship. The authors hold that the 'first two of the emerged identity classes resemble the broad dimensions [...] ethnic versus civic nations' (Ditzmann and Kopf-Beck 2019: 438). In addition, the third largest class (19%) supported an 'ideology-based national identity' and thus democracy-related principles; the fourth class (16%) preferred a 'traits-based national identity', concentrating on (stereotypical) characteristics such as being on time. In summary, they showed that 'being German' can mean different things to German citizens, ranging from the importance of language skills and adhering to a 'German' culture to the need to embrace democratic freedoms and the need to hold German citizenship. Given this variety, they concluded that 'it is difficult to teach newcomers about it [being German]', since there is 'so little consensus among Germans about what it means to be German' (Ditzmann and Kopf-Beck 2019: 440).

Building and expanding upon these studies on national belonging (i.e., the literature on boundary drawing) as well as on the civic–ethnic distinction, we aim to explore the meaning of being German from the perspective of Germans with and without a migrant background. In so doing, we also investigate whether interviewees draw (more or less consciously) a distinction between 'us' and 'them' and how they perceive such distinctions.

3 | Data and Methods

For this exploratory and comparative research project, we conducted six focus group interviews in July 2023 via Zoom. The 36 interviewees were recruited by a specialist agency with a rich expertise in recruiting people, particularly from migrant backgrounds. Concerning the recruitment, the agency told us that we were interested in opinions about German society and German national identity (see also Mußotter and Piwoni 2025, which is based on the same set of interviews, but analyses them from a different theoretical perspective).

Of the 36 participants, 15 were Germans without migrant backgrounds, and 21 were first- or second-generation immigrants, mainly from the three biggest migrant groups in Germany, i.e., Germans with a background in the former Soviet Union, in Turkey, and in Poland. Fourteen of the 36 participants held only German citizenship, while six held dual citizenship (i.e., German and another). One interviewee was only a Turkish citizen and thus considered an outlier; we do not use material from this interviewee in reporting our findings. For the group of Germans with migrant backgrounds, we used the following two criteria: (1) being born in Germany or having arrived in Germany before the age of 14 and (2) having at least one non-German parent. In addition, it was important that the participants had attended school in Germany and possessed sufficient German-language skills.

Besides the recruitment, the agency was also in charge of collecting the signed written consent forms of the participants and setting up the Zoom meetings. We received the participants' written informed consent before conducting the focus group discussions. Importantly, all participants were assured that their confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. Given our study's exploratory nature, we aimed for a mix of voting preferences, age, gender, marital status, place of residence, level of education, and occupation. Nevertheless, those living in Berlin were overrepresented, which can be explained by the location of the agency that helped to recruit the participants.

With respect to the six focus group discussions, two were carried out with Germans without a migrant background only (one of which comprised participants living in Eastern Germany), three with only first- or second-generation immigrants, and one mixed. Each discussion lasted approximately 2 h. The interview template contained general questions about German society and its cohesion, German national identity, the criteria for becoming German, and the Holocaust and its significance. In particular, we asked the following questions in every interview: 'What do you associate with Germany in general?', 'What do you associate with the term 'true German'?', 'What do you think about the term "German people"?', 'What do you think about the term "fatherland" and thus "love for one's fatherland"?' and 'What do you think is important in order to be or become German?' We—the paper's authors, who are two White, middle-aged female researchers, one of whom (Author 2) has a Polish migrant background (second generation)—were present in all six focus groups. At the beginning of each discussion, we introduced ourselves, and Author 2 also mentioned her migrant background (in focus groups in which Germans of migrant background were interviewed), which may have helped to equalize the power imbalance. As we did not share any personal experiences and because the discussions unfolded exclusively among participants, our position was more that of interested third parties who, aside from asking questions, occasionally inquired to better understand interviewees' standpoints.

3.1 | Analytic Procedure

Focus group discussions enable the collection of data across three levels of analysis: the individual, the group, and the interaction (Cyr 2016; Morgan 1996). This study is primarily

concerned with potential similarities and differences in perspectives between Germans with and without migrant backgrounds regarding what is considered significant for being or becoming German. To investigate this, we employed focus groups to identify areas of consensus at the group level, as 'focus groups help to demonstrate agreement or disagreement on interpretations or understandings of questions and phenomena' (Cyr 2016: 244). However, in presenting the findings, we also use individual-level data to illustrate these patterns more concretely, and we point to interactions between participants to show how dissensus or consensus was formed (for further information regarding the status of data gained through focus groups problematising questions such as group pressure and bias, see Hollander 2004).

Prior to analysis, all focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim. We adopted thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2021) as our methodological approach, given its suitability for identifying patterns (themes) within data. Our analysis was guided by two main questions: first, how individual interviewees conceptualised 'being German' and 'becoming German'; and second, whether the meaning-making of these concepts exhibited discernible patterns when comparing responses across interviews and between Germans with and without migrant backgrounds.

To examine whether 'repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke 2006) emerged, we employed two key techniques. First, we used 'in vivo' coding to capture participants' interpretations of these concepts in their own words. Second, to systematically identify similarities and differences in meaning-making both within the interviewees' responses and between the two groups (Germans with and without migrant backgrounds), we applied the constant comparative method (see Boeije 2002). Additionally, we analysed the transcripts to assess whether and in which instances participants explicitly agreed or disagreed with each other (see also Mußotter and Piwoni 2025, in which a comparable method of data analysis was applied to other parts of the interviews with a different research question).

The primary findings, drawn from quotations from the transcripts, are detailed in the next section. All quotations were translated from German to English by us and, where necessary, minor edits were made to ensure contextual clarity. Pseudonyms were assigned to interviewees to conceal their real names, using either German or foreign names/spellings in accordance with their backgrounds. Any pauses by interviewees ('...') and omissions ('[...]') are marked appropriately in the text.

4 | Findings

4.1 | Germans With a Migrant Background: Being German as a Matter of One's Effort and One's Roots

The interviewees with a migrant background differentiated between criteria they thought *should* be fulfilled in order to be German and criteria that are important in order to *be regarded* as German. Concerning the former, most participants agreed on attainable criteria such as language skills and the will to integrate into German society. As Amira, a 32-year-old dual citizen with a Lebanese background, said:

I feel that one should be well integrated [...] one should work [...] If one contributes [...], one feels much more integrated than if one stays at home all day [...] and receives money from the job centre [...]. I feel that the language is very important. It is a difficult language, but it is very exhausting to listen to broken German. I also think that one should make an effort and mingle with the people.

Contributing to German society in general and its wealth in particular was a recurring theme in the discussions. Notably, it was important not only to work, but also to be law-abiding. For instance, Selin, an 18-year-old German with a Turkish background, said, 'You also have to make an effort for it [becoming German] and work and adhere to laws and rules.' Likewise, Maja, a 38-year-old German of Polish descent, added that it is important to '[...] work, pay taxes and adhere to the laws [instead of being] eager to get the German passport in order to apply for *Bürgergeld* (citizen's benefit) and having a good life'. Darja, a 28-year-old with Ukrainian parents, concurred, underscoring the need for 'being proactive', 'standing on your own feet' and 'showing commitment', which, in her view, 'many fail to do'. Thus understood, being German is a status that must be earned by (hard) work. Relatedly, people who do not work but 'receive money from the job centre' or only want to have 'citizen's benefits' should not have the right to become German. Unsurprisingly, the German passport, which they all highly esteemed, was not seen as sufficient to be German.

In addition, accepting and partly adapting to German culture was another aspect interviewees repeated. For instance, Amira held that one 'should accept German culture, the culture of the original Germans', thus drawing a boundary between the 'German culture' and her culture (i.e., Lebanese culture). She took the perspective of her country of origin, noting that 'we do not want many foreigners to come to Lebanon and not accept our culture either'. In contrast to Amira, Janek, a 21-year-old German with Polish background, described the 'German culture' in further detail, as he said:

You do not have to fully adapt to the culture. You do not have to celebrate Christmas or Christi Himmelfahrt [Ascension Day] or such like. You can have your own culture, but you have to incorporate the core values. These are, for instance, freedom of speech, [...] democracy, peace in Germany. Here, no one is allowed to solve problems by means of violence.

In his view, this 'German culture' is based less on religious (i.e., Christian) traditions ('you do not have to celebrate Christmas') and more on democratic values and the rule of law ('no one is allowed to solve problems by means of violence'). This finding is also in line with previous studies, as holding democratic convictions was considered important for being German (notably, Ditlmann and Kopf-Beck 2019; see also Lindstam et al. 2021, on civic criteria).

While the term 'being German' was considered ambiguous, there was broad agreement on the requirement of these

attainable criteria in general and the need to fulfil them to become German in particular, as the discussion continued as follows:

Agnieszka: It is a specific process, the naturalization, that includes language skills, work and so on. Everything is set [...] I have the feeling that all criteria [that are required] make sense, so that this state works [...] If everyone could come here and get everything he/she wants, that would not work in the long term. Therefore, I think these criteria do make sense.

[...]

Igor: It is not difficult. I mean, no one forces you to give up your identity when you pick up your naturalization certificate.

In addition, a few participants mentioned the need to feel German. In contrast to the other aspects, however, this one seemed to be more disputed. More specifically, some interviewees noted that they did not feel this way but rather felt more attached to their country of origin, as the following exchange shows:

Lale: I am Turkish. If someone asks me, I say that I am Turkish but I possess German citizenship. I was born here, have studied here, work here, live here. But for some reason, it is difficult for me to say that I am German.

[...]

Agata: Although I possess German citizenship and have been living in Germany my whole life and adhere to the rules here, I feel Polish [...] I feel more comfortable in Poland than in Germany. Maybe this is the reason why I see myself primarily as Polish.

Interviewer: Why is that do you think?

Agata: We have more relatives in Poland than in Germany. And we are more connected with them than with the ones in Germany. And, I do not know, it is simply the feeling of really being at home [...] I guess these are the things that make you see that you are not German because you feel more comfortable in another country.

Notably, albeit both interviewees fulfilled various attainable criteria that were mentioned before, such as working or being law-abiding, they did not feel German. Though not going into detail, Lale hints at a boundary she perceives, as it is 'difficult' for her to say that she is German. She seems to have a more ambivalent feeling of belonging, defining herself as 'Turkish [with a] German passport'. In contrast, Agata feels Polish for a number of reasons, but does not hint at a boundary she perceives that makes her feel excluded, at least not explicitly. These statements strongly resemble Simonsen's (2018a) distinction between *belonging in* and *belonging with*. While *belonging in* refers to the 'feeling of belonging in [the respective country], [...] the fact of having been born and raised in the country and always lived there', *belonging with* refers to the idea 'that others think that you belong with them' and thus the feeling of being a national (Simonsen 2018a, p.133f). Although the two interviewees consider Germany to be their *home* and a place where they feel they *belong in*, they do not feel *German* and thus lack the feeling of *belonging with* the nationals.

This ambivalence, i.e., the simultaneous feeling of belonging in Germany, while not belonging with the German people, hinted at the question of whether one is *regarded as* German. In this understanding, and in line with previous studies, being, or rather, being considered as German is dependent on whether one has German roots (Moffit et al. 2018; for the Danish case, see Simonsen 2018a). For instance, Fatma, a 26-year-old German with a Turkish background and dual citizenship, remarked that ‘if your parents are German, you are naturally German; or if one of your parents is German, then you are half-German [...]’. Similarly, Lale said that ‘[b]eing born here, I think, is not enough to say that one is 100% German. I think that refers to one’s origin, one’s roots – like a tree. And I have Turkish roots’. While the interviewees did not go into detail, it is plausible to assume that they were referring to the perspective of Germans *without* a migrant background. Understood in this way, the host society does not consider someone to be German if they lack German roots. However, these statements could also be interpreted as an (rather unconscious) internalisation of ethnic criteria by the interviewees with a migrant background themselves. Put differently, Germans with a migrant background may also regard someone as German only if they have German roots. As Fatma and Lale express these statements in a rather neutral way, it seems they accept the idea that one needs to have German ancestors to be regarded as German.

Relatedly, this ethnic notion of nationhood was further substantiated by the view that being German means having a certain appearance (i.e., a particular skin and hair colour), which is in line with previous studies (e.g., Holtz et al. 2013; Moffit et al. 2018, for the German case; Bloemraad 2022, for the US case; Simonsen 2018a, for the Danish case). For instance, Fatma, who has a Turkish background, said, ‘a Black person who is born here, I don’t know if [this person] would say “I am German”, just because you see that he/she is obviously not German’. Interestingly, although the person with dark skin colour was ‘born here’, she/he is ‘obviously’ not regarded as German in her view and would thus also not claim that she/he was German. This statement hints at the boundary faced by Germans with a migrant background who are ‘visibly different from majority members’ (Simonsen 2018a: 122). It is a bright boundary (Alba 2005) that is easily recognizable and thus difficult to overcome. This boundary aspect also featured in the following exchange:

Julia: It [i.e., being German] is when you no longer stick out.

Mirko: Very well said.

Julia: I’m not aware of it, and I often hear the sentence ‘But that [i.e., the speaker’s Russian background] is not recognizable’.

Mirko: Yes, indeed. I like the idea because I’ve often wondered when someone is seen as fully integrated? [...]

Juri: To develop this idea further, no longer sticking out would mean that I speak accent-free German, appear maybe European or German [...] a person with a darker skin colour will always be easily recognizable, phenotype-wise.

Mirko: Imagine if I said that I were Chinese.

[...]

Juri: But I like the answer: if you no longer stick out.

Notably, Julia, a German with Russian parents, who often hears that ‘it is not recognizable’ that she has a Russian background given her accent-free German and her appearance, suggests that being able to pass as German makes one actually German—a remark that strongly resonates with Mirko and Juri. As with the previous quoted statements, however, it remains unclear whether Germans with or without a migrant background communicated this sentence to her. If Julia refers to the host society, her statement is in line with previous studies (e.g., Simonsen 2018a), which show that majority members seem to be surprised when citizens with a migrant background speak the language fluently, because ‘they were not expected’ to do so due to their markers of difference. Moreover, Mirko’s statement (‘Imagine if I said that I were Chinese’) further substantiates the notion that dominating ideas about how a German should look influence who can claim to be German, as he assumes that, given his phenotype, other participants would doubt that he is Chinese even if he claimed to be. In contrast to the other interviewees, Bahar, a 50-year-old German of Turkish origin, explicitly referred to the host society, holding that one ‘can try to reach it [i.e., being German], but people [Germans without a migrant background] will never be completely satisfied’. She suggested that it is not sufficient to fulfil attainable criteria; more importantly, it is necessary to fulfil ethnic ones, such as having German ancestors, that Germans with a migrant background obviously lack. In other words, being German is a state that citizens with a visible migrant background can never reach completely, regardless of how well one is integrated. In sum, Nader, a 25-year-old German with a Lebanese background, posited that being German depends on the perspective:

Nader: I think it’s difficult to say, because it depends on what we understand by ‘a German person’. I think, according to the *Grundgesetz*, everyone possessing German citizenship belongs to the German people. I know that for others, one is German when one lives here, and for others, one is German when one has Arian blood [...].

Interviewer: Interesting that you mentioned the different perspectives. How do you see it personally? What would you say should be the requirement?

Nader: [...] If one wants to see me as German, one should. If one wants to see me as a foreigner, one should. I do not care that much [...] I personally would say that I am German because I was born here and I possess German citizenship.

It is noteworthy that Nader was the first participant to refer to the German constitution in this context. According to the German *Grundgesetz*, one is German if one possesses German citizenship, thus endorsing a civic notion of nationhood. Among interviewees with a migrant background, however, there seemed to be a strong, yet tacit agreement that possessing German citizenship is not enough to be, or to be regarded as, German (see also Celik 2015; Witte 2018).

Besides these criteria, it is important to highlight that a number of participants expressed difficulties with the question and the terms ‘being German’ and ‘becoming German’. Agnieszka, a 43-year-old German with Polish background, for instance, wondered: ‘[T]his [is] about the naturalization, about getting the

German passport? Or how do you define ‘becoming German?’ A few others also questioned the term. For instance, Juri, a 40-year-old German with parents from Uzbekistan, asked whether the question was ‘[...] when are you German [...] or when are you part of the German culture? I have to think about that’. Likewise, Bahar, a 50-year-old German of Turkish origin, thought that the term ‘German’ is itself rather (socially) constructed, as it is ‘[...] very difficult to say one is German or not [as] these are very often clichés’. In contrast to ‘many Germans who are not on time [...] and who are much more relaxed’, she often thinks of herself as ‘a German role model’, since she has fully adopted these stereotypical traits (see also Ditlmann and Kopf-Beck 2019). She seemed to be claiming that, as ‘a German role model’, she *also* belongs to Germany. Giving the example of her hometown of Berlin, she added that the term ‘German’ is not fixed but has changed over time, since ‘English is spoken a lot and everyone who comes to Berlin has contributed something, so that both the two [sides] have approached each other and developed something new’.

In sum, Germans with a migrant background agree on civic criteria such as language skills in order to be or become German. In short, being German means knowing the German language, being law-abiding, having a job, integrating into German society, and supporting democracy. At the same time, however, they stress the need to fulfil ethnic criteria such as having German ancestors in order to be *regarded as German*, especially from the perspective of the majority society. While it is possible to fulfil the former criteria, it is difficult and for some (with a certain phenotype) even impossible to achieve the latter, i.e., to be fully regarded as German.

4.2 | Germans Without a Migrant Background: Being German as a Matter of One’s Effort and Going Beyond

For Germans without a migrant background, we differentiate between criteria that interviewees mentioned in an explicit way and criteria that were mentioned in a more implicit way.

At first glance, Germans without a migrant background explicitly agreed on attainable criteria. They endorsed the predominant narrative in public discourse of a civic and pluralistic German nation (Piwoni 2012) but added the criterion of contributing in economic terms. This is in line with previous studies (e.g., Ditlmann and Kopf-Beck 2019) and is similar to the criteria mentioned by citizens with a migrant background in this study, who also highlighted the importance of integrating and contributing to Germany, especially in economic terms. For instance, Theresa, 24 years old, said, ‘[Y]ou cannot stay in Germany if you do not integrate, do not learn the language, do not contribute to the wealth, i.e., work. If you are not willing to contribute, then you cannot stay in Germany. The will to become part of Germany [...] should be sufficient in my view’. Similarly, 49-year-old Christoph found that one ‘has to deliver’, which means that one has to ‘integrate into the system and not migrate in the social security system’. In addition, being law-abiding and showing commitment to the country was seen as important, as the following exchange shows:

Anne: Language and law-abiding. Very simple.

Bernd: And a certain commitment to the country. I know, there are many with dual citizenship and so on. But I see it in soccer. For instance, Gündogan could have played for Turkey. But he said, ‘No, this is my country, I have always lived here’ [...].

Anne: But Özil was less patriotic. He did not sing the national anthem and so on, he has a tattoo of the *Graue Wölfe* [Grey Wolves, the colloquial term for the Turkish right-wing movement Ülkücü], has taken a photograph with Erdoğan and so on. As a German.

Taking the example of two famous soccer players with Turkish migrant backgrounds, the participants indicated how a ‘German’ should behave. Ilkay Gündogan, who expressed his commitment by playing for the German soccer team, is contrasted with Mesut Özil, as he ‘did not sing the national anthem’ and did not show the amount of commitment participants expected to see. Moreover, in criticizing Özil for showing sympathy for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the controversial, autocratic Turkish president, the participants indicated that they thought Germans should prove their democratic support by distancing themselves from anti-democratic political leaders, especially in public. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned how they themselves showed their commitment to Germany. Such commitment was rather viewed as something that others, i.e., Germans with a migrant background, are required to show.

In contrast to these explicit attainable criteria, it became clear, however, that these were still not seen as sufficient to be German or, rather, to be *labelled* as German. As one participant said, ‘[I]t is not too much to be required to participate in a German-language course and to adhere to the laws [as these] are, I think, minimal requirements’. While not going into detail, this statement indicated that there might also be other criteria beyond these ‘minimal requirements’ that should be fulfilled in order to be or become German. Similarly, another participant stressed that not only must one be law-abiding and accept the German legislation, but, more importantly, ‘one has to express that [one is actually law-abiding]’. He added that this expression [of being law-abiding] ‘does not work by means of a certificate [since] one could somehow cheat’. Although the participant did not elaborate, it seemed that being law-abiding was not seen as sufficient but rather as one of these ‘minimal requirements’. Thus understood, being or becoming German (and thus being *labelled* as German by Germans without a migrant background) means not only fulfilling attainable criteria such as being law-abiding, but also going an ‘extra mile’ to further *prove* it. It remained open, however, in which particular ways citizens with a migrant background have to demonstrate their law-abiding.

The question of how a German should behave was a recurring theme during the discussions. For instance, adopting ‘certain behaviours’ as part of a ‘German culture’ seemed to be crucial for being or becoming German, as shown in the following exchange:

Susanne: You have to know the language.

Sabine: You have to identify with the culture.

Patrick: Especially language and behaviour. A few cultures, you see that in the park where I exercise, there are more Eastern Europeans who just throw their litter away. Just like that.

Interviewer: With ‘behaviour’, you mean following rules?

Patrick: Certain basics, such as that they do not throw away all their litter.

Susanne: I know that from home.

Sabine: I agree.

Patrick: They are from certain regions.

While some participants agreed with Patrick, one of them added a different perspective. Jürgen, a 56-year-old, thought that ‘many, many Germans [...] leave their litter in the city park in Hamburg’, emphasizing that this is more ‘a matter of education and attitude’ than nationality. Subsequently, Patrick justified his statement, stating that ‘it [the idea that Eastern Europeans are less tidy] is like that, and it’s not bad [to point it out]. It’s not right-wing or anything; one can have many Eastern European friends’.

The statement that migrants should adapt to ‘certain basics’ hinted at the need to assimilate to a German culture, substantiating a rather hidden ethno-cultural notion that interviewees endorsed. For instance, Luisa, a 25-year-old participant, said, ‘[I]f you go to Germany or to another country, you need to adapt everywhere [...] you should adapt to the language, the culture, the conditions [...]’. While none of the participants went into detail on this ‘German culture’, it is noteworthy that they neither referred to a certain religion nor to a certain body of literature or art, but rather to certain behaviours one must adopt. In this understanding, being German means being clean and tidy, i.e., not throwing one’s litter away. It remains unclear, however, whether everyone who behaves in this way is labelled as German or whether there are additional criteria imposed by Germans without a migrant background.

Similar to the other group, then, Germans without a migrant background at first appeared to agree on attainable criteria. Later, however, they added criteria that went beyond these ‘minimal requirements’. That is to say, being and becoming German is not only a matter of one’s effort in fulfilling criteria such as being law-abiding, but also a matter of living up

to other aspects conceived by Germans without a migration background.

5 | Discussion and Conclusion

Going beyond previous research on national belonging in Germany, this exploratory study provides novel insights into the meaning of being German from the perspective of Germans with and without a migrant background. Our six focus group discussions yielded two major findings (summarised in Table 1). First, concerning the meaning of being German, Germans with a migrant background differentiated between attainable criteria such as language skills and being law-abiding, which they thought *should be fulfilled* to be German, and ethno-cultural criteria such as German ancestry, which they believed one needed to fulfil to *be regarded as German*. They hinted at the boundary faced by Germans with a migrant background. Lacking German ancestry and a certain appearance, they are not fully regarded as German, especially from the perspective of Germans without a migrant background, resulting in ambivalent feelings of belonging. In line with Simonsen (2018a), they consider Germany as their home and a place they *belong in*, but do not necessarily feel that they *belong with* the German people. Our study thus aligns with the findings of previous research, hinting at the ‘complex mix of civic inclusion and ascriptive exclusion’ (Bloemraad 2022: 1023) citizens with a migrant background perceive. In short, being German is not only a matter of one’s effort and one’s will to integrate (of fulfilling attainable criteria), but also a matter of the majority society’s perception, which the interviewees interpreted as being grounded in ethno-cultural criteria.

In contrast, Germans without a migrant background seemed at first to explicitly endorse attainable criteria such as language skills and law-abiding behaviour. Interestingly, they did not refer to the *Grundgesetz*, the German constitution, according to which one is German if one possesses German citizenship. In the course of the discussions, however, they mentioned additional criteria that went beyond these ‘minimal requirements’. While not going into detail, they stressed the need to adopt ‘a certain behaviour’ as part of a ‘German culture’. It became evident that being German goes beyond the effort and will to fulfil attainable criteria (‘minimal requirements’). Overall, it seems to be difficult or even almost impossible for people of migrant background to fulfil all the criteria that Germans

TABLE 1 | Summary of findings.

	Germans with a migrant background	Germans without a migrant background
Being/becoming German	Civic criteria (i.e., language, being law-abiding) Other attainable criteria (i.e., contributing to Germany’s economy)	Civic criteria (i.e., language, being law-abiding) Other attainable criteria (i.e., contributing to Germany’s economy)
Being regarded as German	Ethno-cultural criteria (explicitly) (i.e., ancestry, appearance)	Ethno-cultural criteria (more implicitly) (i.e., behaviour, culture)
How they discuss the term	With less distance, as it seems to affect them personally (and touches upon questions of belonging); rather long discussions; term’s meaning is disputed	With more distance, as it does not seem to affect them personally (did not discuss questions of belonging); rather short discussions that shift to other topics; term’s meaning is not disputed

without a migrant background expect. In other words, it seems as if citizens with a migrant background not only have to be law-abiding but also need to prove their entitlement. In this sense, citizens with a migrant background need to prove that they are *worthy* of being German. In listing additional criteria, Germans without a migrant background seemed to draw and maintain a boundary between them and the ‘others’, even if they might not be particularly aware of it. In comparison to the other group, though, they did not mention the need to have German ancestors or a certain appearance, at least not explicitly. Despite their differences, both groups agreed that being German means much more than holding a German passport and fulfilling attainable criteria. It was noteworthy that both groups stressed the importance of integrating in and contributing to German society and its wealth. Thus understood, being German is a state one has to earn and work for. Moreover, statements such as ‘one should not be eager to get the German passport in order to apply for *Bürgergeld* (citizen’s benefits)’ indicated that people who do not work but take advantage of the German welfare state are not considered German.

Second, the groups differed in how they discussed the meaning of being German. Germans with a migrant background reflected more critically on the term’s meaning than Germans without a migrant background. Put differently, the term was more in dispute in the former group than in the latter. Furthermore, Germans without a migrant background seemed to talk about this topic with a certain amount of distance, and it seemed as if they were not personally involved or affected by the question of being German. Instead, they tended to list criteria that ‘others’ (i.e., Germans with a migrant background) needed to fulfil, whereas they did not appear to think about these criteria or whether they themselves fulfilled them. This finding resonates with previous literature, as ‘majority members take it [i.e., being and becoming German] for granted and do not experience it as something that plays a role in everyday life’ (Simonsen 2018a: 135). Being and becoming German appeared as a one-sided process, since only the others need ‘to make an effort’ and, among other things, should ‘show commitment to the country’, while they themselves did not feel the need to explain how they express their commitment. They did not seem to be aware that they already belong ‘without question’ (Skey 2013:84) and therefore do not ‘feel the same performative pressure to demonstrate membership’ (Bloemraad 2022: 1029) as the others. In addition, their discussion about the meaning of being German was rather limited and often shifted to other topics such as the abuse of the social security system or the tax system. In contrast, Germans with a migrant background seemed to be much more involved in the discussions, as they were personally affected by the topic and the question of whether they are seen as German and belong to Germany. They clearly differentiated between criteria they thought should be fulfilled and criteria that are important in order to be regarded as German. Their discussions were therefore longer than those of the other group.

Overall, our exploratory study shows that a citizen’s migrant background influences how they understand the meaning of being German, thus underscoring the need to differentiate the two groups. Against the backdrop of our findings, we want to make three suggestions for future research. First, we call for

more attention to be paid to the perspectives of Germans with a migrant background, which has tended to be neglected in previous research, especially in quantitative literature on the civic–ethnic distinction. More specifically, we recommend matching sample quotas not only on classical demographic factors such as age, gender, and education, but also on migration background. Given that 43.1% of children under 5 years old had a migrant background in 2023 (German Federal Statistical Office 2024), considering this perspective is increasingly important in both academic and political terms. Second, since Germans with and without a migrant background highlighted the need to work and to contribute to Germany in economic terms in order to be German, it seems important to include a survey item that explicitly captures this aspect. We recommend adding an item that refers to the importance of having a job to the classical item-battery that researchers of the CED usually use (e.g., Lindstam et al. 2021; Mader et al. 2021; Filsinger et al. 2021). Third, it seems promising to explore the meaning of being a (good) citizen and the meaning of being German simultaneously in future focus group discussions. In so doing, one could detect whether participants differentiate between these terms and, if so, to what extent.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ In the literature, ‘ethnic’ is often conceptualised as including both ethnic and cultural notions of nationhood (see also Smith 1991), and in this text, we follow this line of thought. Notably, there are authors who have demanded a differentiation between ‘civic’, ‘ethnic’ and ‘civic’ notions of nationhood (see, e.g., Nielsen 1999). Overall, however, while one side of the dichotomy is defined as ‘civic’, the other is defined as either ‘ethnic’ or ‘ethno-cultural’.

² Please note, that studies such as the one of Filsinger et al. (2021; see Lindstam et al. 2021) draw on the German Longitudinal Election Study (GLES) data set and have a slightly different item than the one in the International Social Survey Programme data set. More specifically, the former asks respondents how important it is to ‘be able to speak German without an accent’, while the latter asks how important it is to ‘be able to speak the language’.

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