

GIAN MECHERIL

# Understanding Immigration

## Germany needs humane, fact-based policies not populist fearmongering

There is a yawning gap between the immigration debate in Germany and the actual challenges immigration poses. Triggered by events such as Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU's ongoing immigration policy crisis, and the rise of anti-immigration parties like the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), debates increasingly focus on tackling so-called "irregular migration", and are dominated by security and financial arguments. This can be seen in the immigration policy measures proposed by the German government, as well as in the EU's reform of the European asylum system (CEAS). This policy brief calls for a paradigm shift in immigration policy that encompasses investment in social infrastructure, better integration of refugees, and a reevaluation of the relationship between migration and security.

With Russia's invasion of Ukraine causing the single greatest movement of refugees within Europe since World War II, the ongoing crisis of European immigration policy and conflicts over how it should be reformed, the massive electoral gains of the AfD, and finally the Islamist-motivated knife attack in Solingen, debates around the direction of German asylum and immigration policy have grown considerably more heated. The central focus of immigration debates as well as of various hastily adopted legislative measures is not so much immigration itself, but rather tackling so-called "irregular migration" (see the info box below). One of the fundamental lessons drawn from the Nazi era, namely the importance of an individual right to asylum, is increasingly being forgotten. The act of taking in people seeking protection is at risk of degenerating into a purely humanitarian gesture, should Germany be able to afford it both financially and in terms of security.

In light of Germany's ageing population, industry bodies and economic research assume a high level of immigration

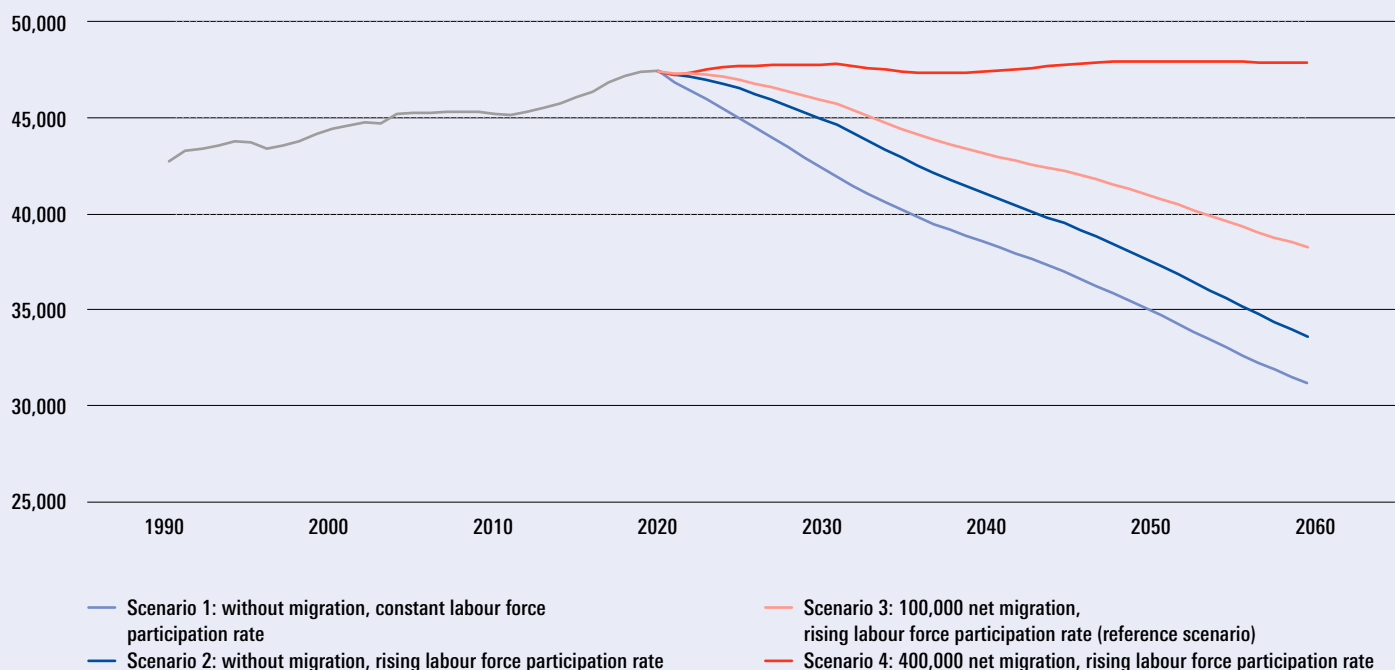
is needed in order to at least be able to keep the current degree of labour force potential at a relatively stable level (Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung 2021). In response to such prognoses, the federal government has implemented a range of measures as part of what it calls its skilled labour strategy, including more immigration treaties with safe home countries in order to be able to recruit workers from these countries, while also being able to deport more asylum seekers there when their applications have been refused.

It is here that a contradiction in German immigration policy reveals itself: on the one hand, it is clear that current measures are aimed at encouraging immigration in order to secure workforce potential and the need for skilled labour. On the other hand, current immigration policy measures constitute an attempt to hinder forced migration, and the discourses that accompany them encourage social divisions and racist ideas about all issues pertaining to immigration.

### "Irregular Migration"

This concept has long been a feature of the right-wing political sphere, but more recently became common in mainstream official politics. Used in relation to migration, the term "irregular" refers to people from non-EU countries entering Germany or crossing its national border without having obtained permission from the authorities to enter or stay in the country (for example, by obtaining a visa). Given that the opportunity for regular entry is open to ever fewer people and that the federal government's resettlement and humanitarian migration programmes are failing, the majority of forced migration ends up classed as "irregular migration" and has thus come to be linguistically associated with criminality.

## Scenarios for the development of workforce potential in Germany by 2060



Note: The net migration depicted represents the annual difference between immigration and emigration of people aged 0 to 110 (i.e., not only the workforce).

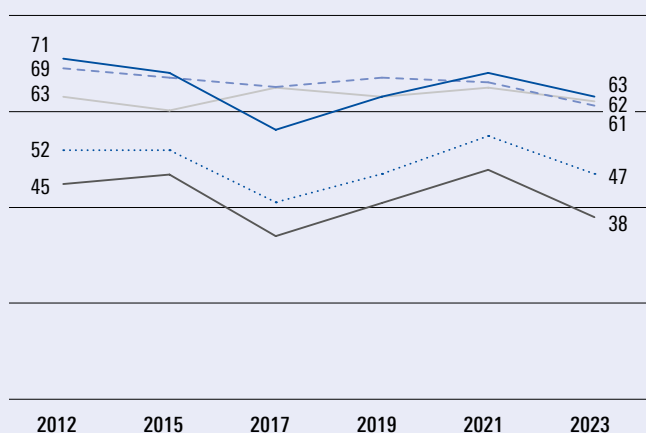
Source: Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung 2021

## Positions in the Current Debate:

- The interior minister of Brandenburg, Michael Stübgen (CDU), called for the individual right to asylum to be struck from Germany's constitution (the Basic Law, or *Grundgesetz*), the minister president of Brandenburg, Dietmar Woidke (SPD), called for the unlawful turning back of asylum seekers at Germany's borders, while the leader of the CDU, Friedrich Merz, called for a halt on the admission of people from Syria and Afghanistan, and Chancellor Olaf Scholz announced in *Der Spiegel* in October 2023: "We need to deport people on a grand scale".
- State elections in Brandenburg, Saxony, and Thuringia have confirmed what experts have long insisted on: the mainstream parties' adoption of harsh and racist anti-immigration rhetoric is not an effective way to counter the electoral successes of the AfD. Even if the decision to vote for the AfD likely depends on a number of different factors, immigration remains one of the central issues that the AfD is successfully exploiting to mobilize support and secure political influence.
- Limiting forced migration is one of the EU's major collective political projects. In May 2024, following years of disputes, a reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) was adopted — yet the result was not to finally implement distribution mechanisms based on solidarity for refugees within the EU or to make migration routes into the EU safer. Instead, the reform constituted "an historical low point for the protection of refugees in Europe" (Pro Asyl) and represents "the greatest curtailing of the European right to asylum since the EU was established" (medico international/kritnet).
- Nevertheless, there are also other perspectives being voiced in heated immigration debates. NGOs, charities, and religious organizations often challenge populist anti-immigration positions and warn that human rights standards need to be maintained and that immigration debates ought to engage with the details of the issue in an evidence-based manner.
- The fundamental right to asylum is widely supported and defended by various parts of democratic civil society. For example, the major demonstrations at the beginning of 2024 with hundreds of thousands of participants calling for an open and diverse society and opposing the AfD's "remigration plans" showed that many people welcome immigration, regard it as a normal occurrence, and want to express and defend this position politically. Yet successfully mobilizing this potential solidarity also depends on political messaging and how it is communicated.
- By contrast, a study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung on "A Culture of Welcome in Times of Crisis" (*Willkommenskultur in Krisenzeiten*, 2024) depicts an ambivalent social mood regarding immigration to Germany: 78 percent of those

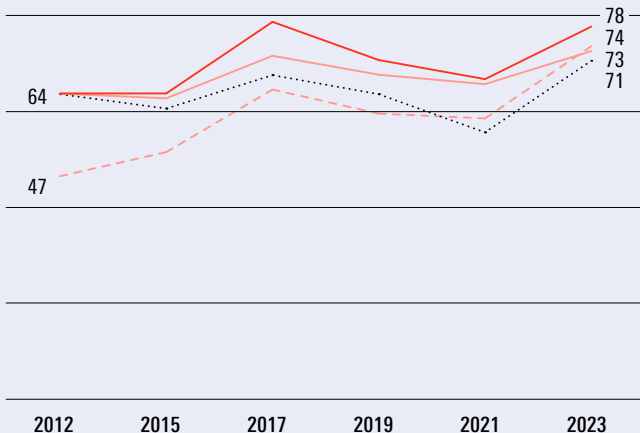
## Attitudes towards immigration: trends for 2012–2023

### Positive attitudes



- Is important to attract international corporations
- Makes life in Germany more interesting
- Helps to relieve Germany's aging problem
- Balances out Germany's skilled worker shortage
- Generates increased revenues for the pension fund

### Negative attitudes



- Creates further burdens on the welfare state\*
- Causes conflicts between natives and newcomers
- Causes problems in schools
- Causes housing shortages in urban areas

Depicted: Percentage of respondents who stated "accurate", multiple responses possible. Question 1: "I will now read you some statements. Please tell me in each case whether, in your opinion, it is accurate." \*Wording in 2012: "Leads to additional burdens on Hartz IV and ALG I [unemployment funds]."

Source: Bertelsmann Stiftung 2024

surveyed are worried about increasing the burden on public services, 74 percent are worried about housing crises in congested urban areas, and 71 percent are worried about problems in schools. At the same time, 61 percent believe that immigration enriches society, 63 consider it beneficial to international corporations, and 62 percent believe that immigration could help counteract the ageing population. These data make clear that the political and media discourses about how much intake the country can handle are increasingly stoking fears about German society's capacity to absorb immigrants.

## Data on Immigration and Asylum

- According to UN figures, approximately 281 million people live outside of their country of birth, which amounts to 3.6 percent of the world's population. At the end of 2023, 117.3 million people had fled their homelands — an historical highpoint and expression of the omnipresence of multiple global crises. The majority of those displaced find refuge in neighbouring countries, that is, in the Global South.
- At the end of 2023, there were 13.8 million foreigners living in Germany: 5.1 million people from EU countries and 8.7 million from non-EU countries, the majority of whom are from Turkey, Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and Russia.
- At the end of 2023, there were around 3.1 million people seeking asylum in Germany. That means there are around 2 million more internal EU migrants in Germany than there are asylum seekers. In 2023, 351,915 people applied for asylum.
- Scholz's call for more forceful deportations is just one of a growing series of calls to expel asylum seekers whose applications have been rejected. Often, the overall number of those obliged to leave is used to statistically substantiate the scale of the problem. Yet this includes people with expired visas or residency permits, as well as asylum seekers with tolerated status. If the figures are adjusted accordingly, at the end of 2023 there were 18,646 asylum seekers whose applications were rejected and who were immediately obliged to leave.
- In 2023, refugee-related expenditures amounted to 27.6 billion euro, or around 6 percent of Germany's federal budget. Of that, 10.6 billion were spent on tackling the causes of forced migration, the largest spending category. In 2023, 10.4 billion euro were budgeted for social welfare payments for those whose asylum application was accepted. Moreover, the federal states collectively contributed almost 6.4 billion euro for services according to the Asylum Seekers' Benefits Act (*Asylbewerberleistungsgesetz*).

## Asylum seekers obliged to leave Germany

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023*
<b>Number of persons obliged to leave the country as of 31 December</b>	249,922	281,143	292,672	304,308	250,749
Deportation order suspended	202,387	235,771	242,029	248,145	201,084
Deportation order not suspended	47,535	45,372	50,643	56,163	49,665
<b>Number of persons with a rejected asylum application obliged to leave the country as of 31 December</b>	152,015	183,667	186,614	183,929	146,337
Deportation order suspended	130,781	163,029	168,000	167,839	127,691
Deportation order not suspended	21,234	20,638	18,614	16,090	18,646

Note: \*Figures as of reporting date, 31 October 2023

Source: SVR 2024

## Overburdening Municipal Infrastructure?

In Germany, the intake and integration of refugees is a municipal responsibility. Since the “Summer of Immigration” in 2015–2016, the overburdening of local governments has been central to the immigration debate. Yet results from a survey of 773 municipal governments by Mediendienst Integration and the University of Hildesheim show that over 70 percent of respondents consider the current situation of providing accommodation for refugees as challenging but feasible (Kühn 2023). The primary difficulties reported are refugees remaining in shared accommodation even when they are entitled to move out (86.7 percent), as well as a lack of buildings (79.2 percent) and real estate (68 percent). Nonetheless, municipal governments consider other areas such as childcare and immigration departments to be even more overburdened. Yet studies show that much of this overburdening is due to structural problems and is therefore independent of refugee migration. For example:

- Between 1990 and 2023, the number of social housing units sank from 2.9 to 1.1 million.
- According to the Paritätische Gesamtverband, Germany faces a labour shortage of around 125,000 skilled workers in the childcare sector.
- According to a further study by the Bertelsmann Stiftung (2023), while immigration offices are burdened by high case numbers, the underlying issue is due to the legal situation becoming increasingly complex as a result of continual changes to legislation, along with staff shortages.

In the current immigration debate, the overburdening of municipal governments supposedly represents one of the most objective arguments for introducing limits to refugee migration to Germany. For example, a position paper by the German District Councils Association (Deutsche Landkreistag, 2024) states: “The capacity of the municipalities to take in and integrate refugees is

... exhausted. A strict limiting of irregular migration is urgently needed.” If we follow the results of the survey by Mediendienst Integration and the University of Hildesheim, according to which municipalities understand the problem of provisioning and accommodating refugees is primarily due to a lack of appropriate (affordable) housing, the relationship between immigration and the overburdening of the municipalities becomes less clear. The same goes for childcare centres and immigration offices: staff shortages and underfinancing create situations in which increased levels of immigration can lead to overburdening. To conclude from this that the necessary course of action is to limit immigration, rather than to demand improved provisioning of municipal infrastructure, is a political decision and not at all an evidence-based (immigration) policy. It has been scientifically proven that the municipalities that maintained and expanded their public infrastructure in the wake of the high immigration levels reached in the mid-2000s are currently much better placed to handle current levels of refugees and immigration (Kühn et al. 2024).

## Security and Migration

- It is clear how the issue of immigration is being turned into a question of security in current debates. New Year’s Eve 2015–16 in Cologne, which represented a central moment when *Willkommenskultur* (welcoming culture) was abandoned and the climate became more hostile towards immigrants in German society and politics, shows how clearly the interplay of racist and security-related discourses have an influence on discussions and policies regarding immigration.

- In the federal government’s security package passed in response to the Islamist-motivated knife attack in Solingen, immigration deterrence was proposed as a solution to issues related to violence. While criminological studies (e.g. Rausch et al. 2023) consider factors such as social status and education, perpetrators’ own experiences of violence, and masculinity norms that

glorify violence as indicators for knife crime and other violent crime, the federal government and others choose to transpose the causes of knife crime in particular onto the background or culture of the perpetrator. The demonization of the “immigrant Other” thereby appears to serve to legitimate harsher immigration policies.

- Knife crime committed by refugees or other immigrants repeatedly appears to set off broad debates about violence, which in German society is supposedly due to “irregular migration”. By contrast, other classes of perpetrator and crimes cause less of an uproar (Perinelli 2024). Where were the security packages in the wake of the knife attacks by racists and xenophobes on Cologne mayor Henriette Reker, on CDU politician Marliese Berthmann, or on FDP advisor Katja Hoyer? Where were the security policy discussions and measures resulting from the 2,589 right-wing, racist, and antisemitic attacks that took place in 2023 alone (VBRG 2024)? And where are the discussions about toxic masculinity, given the ever increasing cases of domestic violence and femicide? The question arises: whose security is actually at issue in all the empty talk about supposed threats?

## Conclusion

In the face of global crises such as climate change, war, and other forms of violence, migration will remain a central issue. In that sense, it is not a matter of simply being for or against migration, as people globally will continue to flee their home countries in order to be able to live in relative security, whether in the long or short term. The political question that is actually at stake is the kinds of conditions in which people migrate, both today and in the future. Framing immigration as “the mother of all problems” bolsters racist arguments and defines immigrants themselves as the problem, which also raises the question of the general conditions in which we want to live together, today and in the future.

With their present immigration policy agenda of deterrence, the German federal government and the EU appear to want to prove that they are capable of action in response to moments that are framed by the media and perceived by society at large as shocking (violent attacks such as the one in Solingen, the electoral successes of far-right parties, etc.). It currently appears as if general social problems, which are the expression of political inaction and poor decision-making during previous legislative terms, can and should be solved by curbing immigration. Repeated cuts to social services, the legitimization of racist attitudes as “well-founded concerns”, the failure of redistribution mechanisms based on solidarity at the European level, and labour shortages are just a few examples of such self-made social problems and challenges.

Yet in order to tackle these, there is no need for emotionally charged symbolic politics directed primarily at a supposedly negative social atmosphere. What we need is long-term, evidence-based, and rational analyses and decisions. This holds in particular for the highly emotionally and ideologically charged realm of immigration policy. In

addition to evidence-based policy, we also need an alternative narrative about immigration. Good immigration policy is good social policy, and good (because preventative) security policy for all, from which society as a whole would benefit. We need effective actors in politics, business, science, and the media who are willing to forcefully represent the civil society voices that are demanding just that, yet who are currently being largely ignored.

## Policy Recommendations

- Increase the construction of social housing, both rapidly and in the long term.
- Expand municipal infrastructure such as childcare centres and immigration services and increase their funding and staffing.
- Revise accommodation regulations for asylum seekers. The provisions for refugees from Ukraine demonstrate that it is both politically and legally feasible to allow refugees to be accommodated by relatives, acquaintances, or other private individuals in order to avoid mass accommodation centres and to relieve the burden on municipalities.
- Prepare and expand municipal infrastructure and institutions to cope with immigration growth in a long-term and sustainable way. In 2015–16, many refugees came to Germany, and infrastructure was created that enabled municipalities to continue to fulfil their responsibilities regarding integration.
- The financing of municipal infrastructure at the European level needs to be coordinated and developed according to principles of solidarity, so as to relieve the financial burden on the municipalities in which many asylum seekers are to be accommodated. Already existing initiatives such as Solidarity Cities or The European Integration and Development Fund (see Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2021) need to be further developed and more forcefully implemented.
- Break down the dichotomy between refugee immigration and skilled labour immigration: facilitate refugees’ access to education and the labour market.
- We need a paradigm shift in European immigration and asylum policy: a distribution of refugees at the European level based on solidarity and the creation of safe migration routes instead of inhuman border regimes.
- Decouple security and immigration policies: we should ensure security for all rather than turning the issue of immigration into one of security.
- Abandon the debt brake and effect a paradigm shift in taxation policy such that we can finance urgently needed immigration and social policy measures.

## Bibliography

**Bertelsmann Stiftung (2023)**, "An den Grenzen: Ausländerbehörden zwischen Anspruch und Alltag", <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/an-den-grenzen>.

**Bertelsmann Stiftung (2024)**, "Willkommenskultur in Krisenzeiten", [https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Migration\\_fair\\_gestalten/Willkommenskultur\\_in\\_Krisenzeiten\\_2024.pdf](https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Migration_fair_gestalten/Willkommenskultur_in_Krisenzeiten_2024.pdf).

**Deutscher Landkreistag (2024)**, "Forderungen des Deutschen Landkreistages für eine Wende in der Migrationspolitik", [https://www.landkreistag.de/images/stories/themen/Fluechtlinge/240902\\_PosPap\\_Migrationswende.pdf](https://www.landkreistag.de/images/stories/themen/Fluechtlinge/240902_PosPap_Migrationswende.pdf).

**Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2021)**, "The European Integration and Development Fund: A Progressive Approach Towards European Solidarity", <https://brussels.fes.de/e/the-european-integration-and-development-fund-a-progressive-approach-towards-european-solidarity>.

**Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung (2021)**, "Demografische Entwicklung lässt das Arbeitskräfteangebot stark schrumpfen", <https://doku.iab.de/kurzber/2021/kb2021-25.pdf>.

**Kühn, Boris (2023)**, "Am Limit? Kommunale Unterbringung von Geflüchteten: Forschungsgruppe Migrationspolitik der Universität Hildesheim", [https://mediendienst-integration.de/fileadmin/Dateien/Universitaet\\_Hildesheim\\_Mediendienst\\_Integration\\_Umfrage\\_Fluechtlingsunterbringung\\_in\\_den\\_Kommunen.pdf](https://mediendienst-integration.de/fileadmin/Dateien/Universitaet_Hildesheim_Mediendienst_Integration_Umfrage_Fluechtlingsunterbringung_in_den_Kommunen.pdf).

**Kühn, Boris, Schammann, Hannes, and Bendel, Petra (2024)**, "Integration als Pflichtaufgabe: Holzweg oder Königsweg zu krisenfesten kommunalen Strukturen?", [https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/media/fb1/sozialwissenschaften/Publicationen/Publicationen\\_NEU/Kuehn-Schammann-Bendel\\_Integration-als-Pflichtaufgabe.pdf](https://www.uni-hildesheim.de/media/fb1/sozialwissenschaften/Publicationen/Publicationen_NEU/Kuehn-Schammann-Bendel_Integration-als-Pflichtaufgabe.pdf).

**Perinelli, Massimo (2024)**, "Messer, Merz und Migration: Seit dem Attentat in Solingen herrscht in der Migrationsdebatte Ausnahmezustand", <https://www.rosalux.de/news/id/52637/messer-merz-und-migration>.

**Rausch, Elena, Hatton, Whitney, Brettel, Hauke, and Rettenberger, Martin (2023)**, "Messergewalt in Deutschland: Eine empirische Untersuchung zu Risikofaktoren sowie Täter- und Tatcharakteristika", in *Forensische Psychiatrie, Psychologie, Kriminologie* (23)17, 327–337.

**Sachverständigenrat Migration und Integration (2024)**, "Kontinuität oder Paradigmenwechsel? Die Integrations- und Migrationspolitik der letzten Jahre". Jahresgutachten 2024, <https://www.svr-migration.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Jahresgutachten-2024-Barrierefrei.pdf>.

**Verband der Beratungsstellen für Betroffene rechter, rassistischer und antisemitischer Gewalt e.V. (2024)**, "Rechte, rassistische und antisemitische Gewalt in Deutschland 2023: Eine alarmierende Jahresbilanz der Opferberatungsstellen", <https://verband-brg.de/rechte-rassistische-und-antisemitische-gewalt-in-deutschland-2023-jahresbilanzen-der-opferberatungsstellen/>.

**Gian Mecheril** studied political science, sociology, and conducted interdisciplinary research on antisemitism in Frankfurt am Main and Berlin. His academic and activist work focuses on border and immigration regimes, racism, and antisemitism.

**IMPRINT** POLICY BRIEF 01\_2025 is published by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation  
Responsible in the sense of German Press Law: Loren Balhorn · Straße der Pariser Kommune 8A · 10243 Berlin, Germany · [www.rosalux.de](http://www.rosalux.de)  
ISSN (Print) 2944-4144, ISSN (Online) 2944-4152 · Editorial deadline: October 2024 · German-language editing: TEXT-ARBEIT, Berlin  
Translation: Louise Pain and Joe Keady for Gegensatz Translation Collective · Layout/Production: MediaService GmbH Druck und Kommunikation

This publication is part of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation's public relations work. It is distributed free of charge and may not be used for electoral campaigning purposes.