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Determinants of Refugees' Identification with Country of Origin and Host Country and Their Naturalization Intentions: Evidence from Germany

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ABSTRACT

Despite extensive research on immigrants' identification and its integration implications, a substantial gap remains in understanding the factors and mechanisms underlying refugees' identification processes. This study addresses this gap by adopting a comprehensive perspective, simultaneously examining their origin-country and host-country identification alongside naturalization intentions among recently arrived refugees in Germany. Drawing on a nationally representative, longitudinal survey of refugees, our findings reveal the importance of refugee-specific and immigrant-generic factors shaping identification processes and citizenship intentions. Factors such as health risks, traumatic experiences, barriers to return, and residency obligations are significantly related to origin-country and host-country identifications and citizenship intentions, highlighting the unique challenges faced by refugees. Refugee identification and citizenship intentions are also influenced by immigrant-generic factors, including welcoming societal context upon arrival, destination language proficiency, contacts with natives, and ties with family and friends in their country of origin. Theoretical insights from our study underscore the presence of distinct mechanisms driving origin-country identification versus host-country identification and citizenship intentions.

KEYWORDS

Identification; refugees; asylum procedure; trauma; immigration

Introduction

Research indicates significant consequences of immigrants' identification with their country of origin and host country for integration outcomes (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2012), including labor market success (Bisin et al., 2011). Origin-country identification refers to a migrant's emotional connection and sense of belonging to their country of origin, while host-country identification reflects their attachment to the host society (Fleischmann & Verkuyten, 2016).¹ A substantive body of research has studied the determinants of immigrants' identification, such as the role of contacts with ethnic majority members (Leszczensky et al., 2019), education (Grandérath et al., 2021), length of stay in the host country (Diehl et al., 2016), language proficiency (Hochman & Davidov, 2014), immigrant generation (Diehl & Schnell, 2006), religion (Fleischmann & Phalet, 2018), religiosity (Leszczensky et al., 2020), and perceived discrimination (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2009).

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While substantial research examines the determinants of origin-country and host-country identification among immigrants broadly, much less attention has been given to refugees as a distinct sub-group within this population.² This is an important omission in the literature, given the recent surge in the global number of people seeking refuge (UNHCR, 2023). A key limitation of the few studies that have examined the determinants of refugee identification is their focus on *immigrant-generic factors*, such as education, language proficiency, and perceived discrimination (Bobowik et al., 2017; Damen et al., 2024; De Vroome et al., 2014). While these factors are relevant to both refugees and non-refugee migrants, they do not account for the unique experiences of refugees.

A significant gap in the literature remains: little is known about *refugee-specific* determinants—conditions that apply exclusively or predominately to refugees but not to non-refugee migrants. In this study, we address this knowledge gap by examining four factors that distinguish refugees from immigrants who migrate for other reasons, such as family, work or study. First, unlike non-refugee migrants, refugees often flee war-torn regions and political, religious, or ethnic persecution (Hatton, 2016). These dire conditions in their countries of origin often make return uncertain or even impossible, whereas non-refugee migrants typically retain a safer return option. Second, refugees frequently suffer psychological distress and health issues caused by conflict and forced displacement (Lindert et al., 2009). Third, upon arrival, they undergo protracted asylum procedures that can leave them in limbo—uncertain whether they may stay or will be forced to return—potentially aggravating preexisting trauma (Laban et al., 2004). Fourth, unlike other immigrants, refugees frequently experience legal constraints on their initial residence choices and face ongoing mobility limitations even after securing status (Kosyakova & Kogan, 2022). These refugee-specific selection and reception conditions suggest distinct mechanisms influencing origin-country and host-country identification. Against this backdrop, we examine how the conditions in the origin countries, asylum procedure, residential restrictions, and traumatic events experiences shape refugees' identification processes.

To put the relevance of these refugee-specific in context, we also study a broad set of *immigrant-generic* factors that could impact refugees' identification, i.e., factors that apply to both refugee and non-refugee immigrant groups. This allows us to assess how strongly identification processes among refugees are driven by refugee-specific or immigrant-generic factors. Additionally, we compare refugees' host-country identification with their intentions to acquire citizenship. While host-country identification reflects emotional attachments to the host country, citizenship acquisition—or the intention to pursue it—is seen as a more objective indicator of this attachment (Donnaloja, 2020; Esser, 2009). Although these two concepts are thought to be linked, little empirical research has examined whether they share common determinants (Jones-Correa et al., 2018). Most studies on citizenship acquisition focus on immigrants broadly (Bloemraad & Sheares, 2017; Diehl & Blohm, 2003; Vink et al., 2021), and rarely address refugees specifically (Mossaad et al., 2018). Examining both host-country identification and citizenship intentions thus sheds light on whether these forms of attachment arise from similar or distinct factors.

We address these questions by studying identification and citizenship intentions among refugees in Germany. This country is interesting to study, as it has witnessed a major increase in refugee flows in the past decades. For instance, in 2015 and 2016, around 1.2 million refugees requested asylum in Germany, with significant numbers coming from Syria (44%), Afghanistan (18%), Iraq (11%) and Eritrea (11%). More recently, after the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine in 2022, more than 7 million Ukraine refugees have escaped to Poland, Germany, and other European countries (UNHCR, 2023). We draw on the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees in Germany (Brücker et al., 2025), a large-scale, nationally representative, longitudinal survey among refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and other origin countries who arrived in Germany between 2013 and 2019. The data includes a wide range of information on the socioeconomic and sociocultural position of recent refugees and detailed measures of their identifications and citizenship intentions.

Theory and hypotheses

Theoretical mechanisms

We derive our hypotheses from different strands of research, which can be broadly summarized as the literatures on (1) assimilation and immigrant integration (Gordon, 1964), (2) the role of origin-country conditions and ties to the origin country (Vertovec, 2001), (3) theories on insecurity and coping (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005), and (4) processes of rejection-identification and reactive ethnicity (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). While some of these frameworks explain either origin-country or host-country identification, other frameworks have been advanced to understand both. Furthermore, some frameworks propose immigrant-generic determinants, others refugee-specific factors. In our study, we address these different frameworks, some of which lead to opposite expectations.

Classical assimilation theory posits that identification is a key component of immigrants' emotional integration, arising from increasing social integration (e.g., frequent interethnic contacts), cultural integration (e.g., host-country language proficiency), and structural integration (e.g., parity in education, employment, and health) (Diehl & Schnell, 2006; Gordon, 1964; Jonsson et al., 2018). The theory posits that as immigrants gradually achieve greater social, cultural, and structural integration, origin-country identification declines while host-country identification and the likelihood of citizenship acquisition increase (Gordon, 1964).

A second field of research stresses the importance of origin-country conditions, arguing that the ties and connections immigrants maintain with their country of origin, as well as the political and economic situation in the origin country, may play a continuous role in the lives of immigrants (Vertovec, 2001). Based on this literature, we posit that when immigrants still have close connections to family and friends in their origin country, they may remain strongly identifying with their ethnic group and origin country. Additionally, we posit that more favorable conditions in the origin country (economic or political) result in stronger origin-country identification.

The *insecurity theory* argues that when people are confronted with stress and insecurity about desired outcomes, they more strongly value loyalty to their in-group to get access to resources and emotional support from in-group members (Inglehart & Welzel, 2005). When applied to immigrants, this means that when coping with stress and uncertainty, they will more strongly identify with their immigrant group and country of origin. The *rejection-identification theory* (Branscombe et al., 1999) and the *reactive ethnicity theory* (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) have much in common with the insecurity model. These theories argue that immigrants tend to cope with perceptions of discrimination and exclusion against themselves or their in-group by distancing themselves from the host society and increasing their origin-country identification. Hence, when immigrants feel that they are unwelcome in the host country or even treated unfairly, they are hypothesized to 'separate' themselves (high origin-country identity, weak host-country identity). When they are treated more favorably, it is argued that immigrants become dual identifiers instead.

In the following, we use these general mechanisms to inform our argumentation and reasoning about refugee-specific and immigrant-generic factors. Table 1 presents the hypothesized relations and the mechanisms underlying the predictions. Note, that due to the conceptual closeness between host-country identification and intentions to acquire host-country citizenship, we assume that specific determinants are related to these two outcomes equally.

Refugee-specific factors

Regarding factors that more strongly or even exclusively apply to refugees, we consider four: mental health/trauma, the political conditions in the origin country, the context of reception in the host country, and uncertain prospects of staying in the host country.

Table 1. Frameworks and hypothesized relationships.

	H	Framework	Origin-country identification	Host-country identification & intentions to acquire German citizenship
Refugee-specific				
Mental health issues & trauma	1	Insecurity	+	
Perceived barriers to return	2	Origin-country conditions	–	
Unfavorable context of reception: residential restrictions	3a	Rejection-identification	+	–
Uncertain prospects of staying	4	Insecurity	+	
Immigrant-generic				
Unfavorable context of reception: public attitudes	3b	Rejection-identification	+	–
Social/cultural/structural integration	5	Classical assimilation	–	+
Family/friends in origin country	6	Origin-country conditions	+	
Relative economic status origin country	7a	Rejection-identification	+	–
Muslim identity	7b	Rejection-identification	+	–

Note: The rejection-identification theory is identical to the reactive ethnicity theory. ‘+’ and ‘–’ indicate increased/decreased identification, respectively.

First, based on the insecurity mechanism, we examine refugees’ mental health and trauma. Although non-refugee immigrants may also face mental health issues and trauma, research indicates that refugees are at significantly higher risk for mental health problems, including trauma and depression, than other immigrants (Lindert et al., 2009). This heightened vulnerability stems in part from exposure to violent or life-threatening situations in their countries of origin and during migration. For instance, among recently arrived refugees in Germany, around one-quarter reported experiencing shipwrecks, two-fifths mentioned physical assaults, and 15% of female refugees reported sexual assaults (Ambrosetti et al., 2021). Additionally, research indicates that stress in the host country can further exacerbate refugees’ mental health challenges (Beiser & Hou, 2016). Based on the insecurity model, we argue that trauma, and mental health risks more broadly, influence refugees’ identification. Specifically, we propose that those with poor mental health are more likely to turn to their in-group as a coping strategy, thus hypothesizing that *health risks have a positive effect on origin-country identification* (H1).

Second, drawing on the literature which emphasizes the role of origin-country conditions, we consider the sociopolitical situation in refugees’ countries of origin. While refugees flee their home countries due to war, political persecution or poverty, these conditions may change over time as they settle in the host country. For instance, armed conflicts may subside, specific regions may experience reduced violence, or political regimes may shift, potentially alleviating the threat of persecution. Such changes can influence the feasibility of return (Alrababa’h et al., 2023), which, in turn, may shape refugees’ origin-country identification (Di Saint Pierre et al., 2015; Schimmer & Van Tubergen, 2014). We argue that origin-country identification may be less salient for refugees whose home countries continue to block return opportunities. Specifically, we hypothesize that *refugees who perceive more barriers to returning will exhibit weaker identification with their country of origin* (H2).

Third, based on the idea that contexts of reception in the host country can be less or more challenging (Luthra et al., 2018; Portes & Borocz, 1989), we first study the role of administrative challenges regarding residency. This factor is especially salient for refugees, who often encounter numerous restrictions regarding their living arrangements and access to the labor market (Brell et al., 2020; Fasani et al., 2022; Kosyakova & Kogan, 2022). Such administrative challenges and restrictions may be perceived as being less welcome in the host country. Based on the rejection-identification and reactive-ethnicity theories, we therefore hypothesize that *administrative challenges regarding their residency lead refugees to identify less strongly with the host country and more with their country of origin* (H3a).

Fourth, we study the impact of uncertain prospects of staying in the host country. At any point in time, refugees’ residence title is either (1) pending—the decision on their asylum request

has not been made, (2) approved, or (3) rejected (Kosyakova & Brenzel, 2020). Those whose status was still pending at the time of the survey experience much uncertainty and stress about their prospects to stay in the host country. We compare this group, whose status is still pending (i.e., temporary permission), with those with approved status—as these groups face different uncertainties. Drawing on the insecurity theory, we hypothesize that *refugees whose request is still pending have stronger origin-country identification than those whose request has been approved and have certain prospects of staying (H4).*

Immigrant-generic factors

In addition to the refugee-specific factors, we examine determinants that apply more broadly to refugees and non-refugee migrants.

First, we examine the role of an unfavorable societal reception (Lienen & LeRoux-Rutledge, 2024; Luthra et al., 2018), which indicates the degree to which refugees feel welcomed and accepted by the majority population. Based on the rejection-identification and reactive-ethnicity theories, we hypothesize that, *when feeling more welcome in Germany upon arrival, refugees identify more strongly with the host country and less so with their country of origin (H3b).*

Drawing on classical assimilation theory (Gordon, 1964), we hypothesize that *increased social, cultural, and structural integration lead to reduced origin-country identification and increased host-country identification among refugees (H5).* Drawing on the literature on origin-country conditions (Vertovec, 2001), we posit that *having (more) friends and family in the country of origin results in stronger origin-country identification among refugees (H6).*

Drawing on the rejection-identification and reactive-ethnicity theories (Diehl & Schnell, 2006), we expect that *refugees with higher premigration economic status more strongly identify with their country of origin and less so with the host country (H7a).* This is because migrants who had obtained higher social status in their origin country ('contextualized attainment') have higher expectations about their prospects in the receiving country. They are, therefore vulnerable to status loss (Engzell & Ichou, 2020) and feelings of being treated unfairly. Also, religion may be a ground for reactive forces. In the largely secular-Christian European context, Muslim minorities are perceived and treated more negatively by the host-country populations than other groups (Foner & Alba, 2008), and are strongly discriminated against (Aidenberger & Doehne, 2021; Di Stasio et al., 2021; Thijssen et al., 2022). While most refugees in our study are Muslim, some refugees identify as Christian or else. We hypothesize that *Muslim refugees identify more strongly with their country of origin and less strongly with their host country than non-Muslim refugees (H7b).*

Data and methods

Data

The empirical analysis presented in this study is based on the most recent version of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (Brücker et al., 2025). This extensive, longitudinal survey was launched in 2016 and targeted asylum-seekers arriving in Germany between 2013 and 2019 independent of their asylum-status (Kroh et al., 2017; Steinhauer et al., 2023). The target population was derived from the Central Register of Foreigners, which serves as Germany's official registry for foreign citizens. The data is collected annually and includes several refreshment samples (termed M3, M4, M5, and M6) to compensate for panel attrition and to cover more recent arrivals in Germany.

The survey is based on a concept of households according to which every adult household member is interviewed. The survey data collection process involved face-to-face interviews facilitated by computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI). To ensure clear and accurate communication, support from translators, auditory aids, and questionnaires translated into seven languages (Arabic, English, Farsi/Dari, German, Kurmanji, Pashtu, and Urdu) was made available as needed.

The original dataset includes 10,320 individuals who were surveyed at least once between the 2016–2022 survey period. To capture the target population, we restrict data to refugees who arrived in 2013 or later (212 persons were dropped) and those with non-missing month and year of arrival in Germany (836 persons were dropped). We further excluded refugees who arrived as minors in Germany (662 persons arrived aged 17 or younger, and 1 person with missing information on year of birth were dropped). After these exclusions, we ended up with 8,623 respondents and 24,392 person-year observations (88% of the original sample). Since the availability of our dependent outcomes varies by survey waves, the size of the corresponding analytical samples differs (see [Table 2](#) for details).

Dependent variables

We use questions on how strongly refugees feel connected to their country of origin and to Germany to capture *origin-country* and *host-country identification*, respectively. Identification questions were, except for the 2020 survey,³ measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1) ‘not at all’ to 5) ‘very strongly’. [Table 2](#) provides details on the underlying questions and when the various measures were included in the survey. Furthermore, regarding *German citizenship intentions*, respondents were asked whether they intended to apply for German citizenship. Answer categories varied from 1) ‘yes, definitely’ to 4) ‘definitely not’ in 2017–2021, while in 2022 an additional answer category was added ‘yes, have already applied’ (we combined this category with ‘yes, definitely’).

While much of the literature treats identification with the origin and host countries as opposing constructs (e.g., De Vroome et al., 2011, 2014), we follow approaches that reject this assumption (Fleischmann & Verkuyten, 2016; Zimmermann et al., 2007). Accordingly, we treat origin- and host-country identification as separate rather than mutually exclusive dimensions. Additional analyses confirm a weak but statistically significant negative correlation between origin- and host-country identification (Spearman’s $Rho = -0.067$; $p=0.000$), suggesting that while some predictors may overlap, the two forms of identification are not simply opposites.

Interestingly, host-country identification and intentions to acquire German citizenship are positively and statistically significantly correlated, though the correlation is weak (see [Table A2](#), Online Appendix). This suggests that, despite our assumption that both concepts are linked and may share common causes, they are also likely to be subject to distinct mechanisms.

Refugee-specific factors

Regarding mental health issues, we include an indicator for *mental health risks*, as well as an indicator for respondents’ experience of *trauma* during their migration journey. To assess mental health risks, we utilized a mental health component summary scale (Andersen et al., 2007) and

Table 2. Survey information on dependent variables and available analytical samples.

	Origin-country identification	Host-country identification	Intentions to acquire German citizenship
Survey question	How connected do you feel to your country of origin?	How connected do you feel to Germany?	Do you intend to apply for German citizenship?
Answer scale	Answer scale: 1 ‘Very strongly’ to 5 ‘Not at all’.		1 ‘Definitely not’ to 4 ‘Yes definitely’
Available survey years	2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 (first-time respondents), 2021	2017 (panel respondents), 2019 (panel respondents), 2020 (panel respondents), 2021	Answer scale: (1) ‘yes, definitely’ to ‘probably not’ to (4) ‘definitely not’
Analytical sample	7,786 persons, 15,251 person-year observations	5,237 persons, 10,607 person-year observations	2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, (first-time respondents), 2022
			7,370 persons, 17,814 person-year observations

Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (v39).

dichotomized it based on a threshold identified as clinically relevant in prior studies predicting depression and anxiety disorders (Jaschke et al., 2023). Traumatic experiences are commonly acknowledged as a causal factor for PTSD (Silove et al., 1997).

To assess refugees' *perceived barriers to return* to their origin country, we relied on self-reported evaluations of changes necessary to make return possible. Specifically, respondents were asked: 'What needs to change in your country of origin so that you could return there?' and were presented with five options (multiple selections allowed): (1) end to war and violent conflict, (2) change of government or leadership, (3) free elections, (4) better general economic situation, and (5) other changes. Based on these responses, we constructed a continuous variable denoting the total number of reasons selected. The question was administered to all respondents between 2016 and 2018, and thereafter only to first-time respondents. As a result, we use each participant's earliest non-missing response and keep it fixed at the individual level (see Section *Method*, for details on how missing values were handled).

To assess administrative challenges regarding refugees' residency, we considered self-reported information in the household interview on facing *residency restrictions*, either to the federal state or a county, i.e., limitations on choosing where to live. To approximate uncertain prospects of staying, we examined *residence title*, where we differentiated between (1) residence permission (reference category), (2) no residence permission, (3) temporary resident permission, and (4) other. Particularly, temporary residence permission may be viewed as an uncertain stay prospect compared to those whose request has been approved and have certain prospects of staying.

Immigrant-generic factors

Based on commonly used proxies of the concepts of social, cultural and structural integration (e.g., Aksoy et al., 2023), we constructed a *multidimensional integration index*, combining three elements: 1) frequency of contact with Germans, on a scale from (1) 'never' to (5) 'every day'; 2) mean of self-rated German-speaking, reading, and writing abilities on a scale from (1) 'not at all' to (5) 'very good'; and 3) labor market status, distinguishes between those not employed, in training/education, and gainfully employed. Following the International Labor Organization (ILO), we define employment as work performed for pay or profit. Accordingly, we count respondents who reported to be full- or part-time employed, in vocational education, internships or apprenticeships, and those marginally employed as being employed as long as they indicated positive monthly earnings. Those in education, training, or language courses without pay fall into the 'training/education' category, and all other non-working respondents are coded as 'not employed'.

The role of origin-country conditions is gauged through a variable representing the *number of family or relatives living in the origin country*. To create this measure, we collected respondents' reported information about the presence of their (1) partner, (2) children (up to eight), (3) father, (4) mother, (5) siblings, and (6) other 'close relatives' in their country of origin. The sum of these six types of close ties forms the corresponding measure.

Furthermore, we include a measure capturing *feeling welcome in Germany upon arrival*. We recoded the original scale—which ranged from (1) 'very much' to (5) 'not at all'—so that higher values correspond to stronger feelings of being welcome.

Additionally, we considered the *relative premigration economic status* and differentiated between those affiliated as *Muslim* or otherwise. The measurement for premigration economic status relies on self-reported information on the economic situation relative to others before migration. The scale ranges from (1) 'well below average', (2) 'below average', (3) 'average', (4) 'above average', (5) 'well above average', and we included this as a continuous measure. The indicator for being Muslim is derived from self-reported religious affiliation, with a reference category including Christians or other religions, as well as non-religious respondents.

Control variables

As control variables, *age at arrival* (calculated as the difference between self-reported arrival year and birth year), *years of education before arrival* (based on years of school, vocational and higher education acquired in the country of origin), an indicator for being *female*, *country (group) of origin*, and *sample* (M3–M6; refer to Section Data). The country-of-origin variable is based on citizenship reported in the first interview (or in the follow-up interview in case of missing information). We distinguish among 10 groups: (1) Syria, (2) Afghanistan, (3) Iraq, (4) Eritrea/Somalia, (5) Iran, (6) former USSR, (7) West Balkan, (8) rest Africa, (9) other, and (10) stateless. Online Appendix [Table A1](#) provides summary statistics of all the variables used in the analyses.

Method

We estimate Growth Curve Models (GCM) to analyze the development of identification outcomes over the duration of stay (calculated as the difference between the self-reported month and year of arrival and the month and year of the survey interview) with random-effects growth curves (Hox et al., 2017). Growth curve models estimate each individual's intercept and slope describing their growth trajectory based on the values of the dependent variable (i.e., origin-country and host-country identification as well as citizenship intentions) at each time point. From these individual intercepts and slopes, average intercepts and slopes are computed, as well as individual deviations from the averages. We also model the covariance between random intercepts and random slopes, considering the relevance of the initial level of identification (at t_0 of the panel) for the speed of identification growth. A negative covariance, e.g., for host-country identification, could indicate that individuals with greater national identification at t_0 have less room for improvement and, therefore, experience slower progress. Corresponding models are specified in the following equation:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_1 + \beta_2 Ref.Spec.'_i + \beta_3 Immi.Gen.'_i + \beta_4 Controls'_i + \beta_5 Durationof\ stay_{it} + \beta_6 Durationof\ stay_{it}^2 + \zeta_{1i} + \zeta_{2i} Durationof\ stay_{it} + \varepsilon_{it},$$

where Y_{it} denotes the outcome variable (i.e., origin-country identification, host-country identification, citizenship intentions). $Durationof\ stay_{it}$ denotes months of stay in Germany of person i in survey year t . The vectors $Ref.Spec.'_i$ and $Immi.Gen.'_i$ denote time-invariant and time-varying individual-level variables associated with refugee-specific and immigrant-generic factors. The vector $Controls'_i$ denotes included time-invariant and time-varying controls. ζ_{1i} and ζ_{2i} are random intercept and slope effects (for duration of stay), respectively, allowing individual-specific variations in the initial level and rate of change of the outcome. ε_{it} is the residual error for individual i in survey year t , typically assumed to be normally distributed and independent.

To address item nonresponse, we apply multiple imputation methods using chained equations (van Buuren, 2012). We estimate 25 imputed datasets with complete information. Following Rubin's Rubin (1987) approach, we combine the results of the analyses performed on each dataset, considering the imputation variances within and between the imputed data sets. Respondents with missing information on dependent outcomes were included in the multiple imputation but not in the corresponding analyses. Note that we refrain from imputing the missing dates of arrival or birth year because such missing information is likely not to be random and to correlate with education and literacy. Online Appendix [Table A1](#) illustrates that missing information was present to varying degrees across measures.

Results

Descriptive findings

Before discussing the findings related to the hypotheses, we report key descriptive results. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the development of (unconditional, mean) values for each of the three outcomes over the length of stay in Germany.

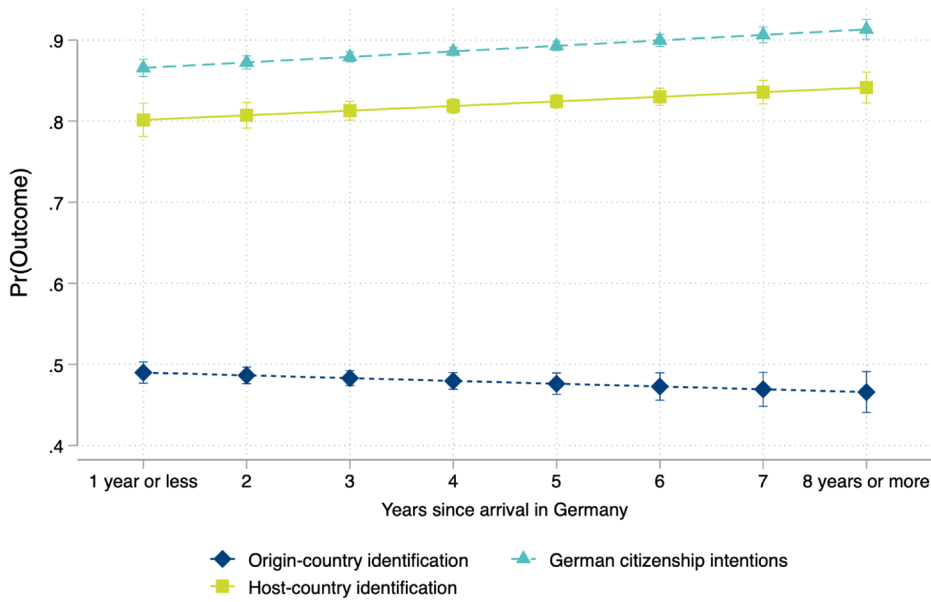


Figure 1. Distribution of origin-country and host-country identification and definite German citizenship intentions over the duration of stay in Germany.

Notes: Adjusted prediction from linear probability regression with robust standard errors clustered at the individual level. Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (v39).

Notably, a significant proportion of refugees express a stronger identification with Germany than with their country of origin. In the first years of arrival, 80% of refugees strongly or very strongly identify themselves with Germany, while corresponding numbers for origin-country identification are notably lower – 49%. With prolonged stay in Germany, we observe a somewhat rising trend in identification with Germany (84% eight or more years after arrival; statistically significant change at $p < 0.05$). In comparison, identification with the origin country shows a slight decrease (47% eight or more years after arrival; not statistically significant change). This contrasts sharply with findings reported among non-refugee groups in Germany (Diehl & Schnell, 2006) and elsewhere (Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2012), where immigrants typically exhibit significantly stronger origin-country than host-country identification. Furthermore, our results suggest that a substantial percentage of refugees in Germany, approximately 87%, express a definite intention to acquire citizenship and that this inclination increases with the length of stay in Germany (91% eight or more years after arrival; statistically significant change at $p < 0.001$).

One could speculate whether the high levels of host-country identification observed at arrival reflect an idiosyncratic situation, particularly shaped by the initial ‘unusually welcoming’ response to Syrian refugees in Germany in 2015 (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018). To address this concern, we disaggregated self-identification measures by origin-country groups and survey year. Results presented in Appendix Table A3 suggest that Syrian refugees do not drive this finding: refugees from Iraq, the Western Balkans, and stateless individuals reported even higher identification levels. Moreover, excluding Syrian refugees does not alter the mean values of host-country identification (see Online Appendix Table A3). It is important to note that the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey regularly adds refreshment samples to mitigate panel attrition and to capture newly arrived refugee cohorts.

Refugee-specific factors

Figures 2–4 depict the outcomes derived from bivariate and multivariate GCMs (see Online Appendix Table A4 for full details on multivariate results).

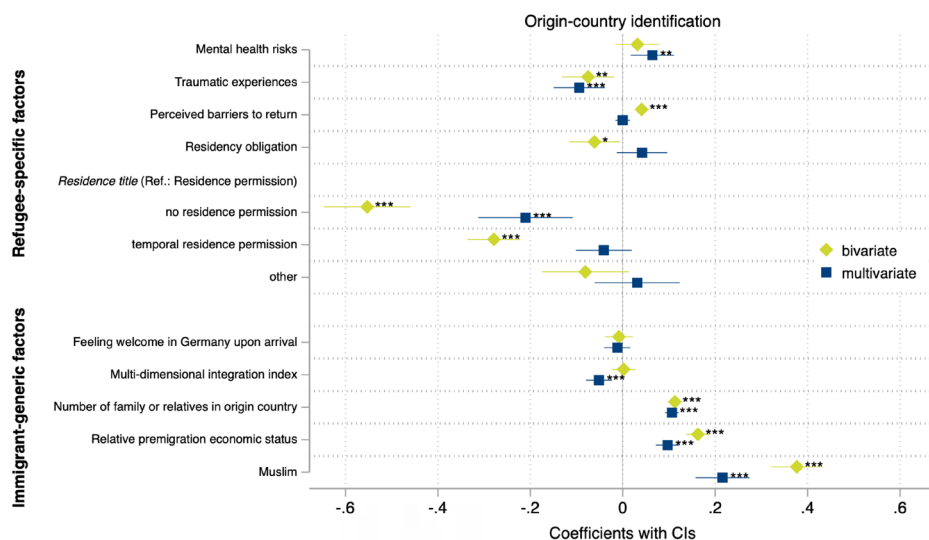


Figure 2. Estimated coefficients on origin-country identification (with 95% CIs).

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-sided tests). Results from the growth curve models, Model 1 in Online Appendix Table A4. Models additionally control for length of stay in Germany, arrival age, years of education before arrival, gender, origin-country group, and survey sample. Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (v39).

Consistent with *H1*, our findings reveal that refugees facing heightened mental health risks exhibit a stronger identification with their country of origin. Specifically, refugees who reported as having mental health risks demonstrate a 0.06 points increase in origin-country identification on a scale between 1–5 (Figure 2). Conversely and contrary to *H1*, refugees who have encountered traumas during their flight appear to identify less strongly with their country of origin (–0.09 points, Figure 2). While not hypothesized, our results indicate that mental health risks are associated with a reduced host-country identification (–0.08 points on a scale between 1–5, Figure 3) and intentions to obtain German citizenship (–0.02 points on a scale between 1–4, Figure 4). Traumatic experiences exhibit no significant relationship with either host-country identification (Figure 3) or intentions to obtain German citizenship (Figure 4).

Contrary to *H2*, greater number of perceived barriers to return is not significantly related to lower identification with refugees' country of origin (Figure 2). Notably, however, more perceived barriers appear to increase intentions to obtain German citizenship (0.02 points, Figure 4; for host-country identification, the relationship is positive but not statistically significant, Figure 3).

In line with *H3a*, concerning the impact of administrative challenges regarding their residency, residency obligation is negatively correlated with intentions to acquire German citizenship (–0.03 points, Figure 4), but in contrast to *H3a*, it is not significantly related to origin-country and host-country identification.

According to *H4*, refugees facing uncertainty due to a pending asylum request should exhibit stronger origin-country identification. However, we do not find a significant relationship between the uncertainty of staying and origin-country identification (see Figure 2). Additionally, while not our primary focus, we find that lacking a residence permit diminishes both origin-country identification (–0.21 points, Figure 2) and intentions to acquire German citizenship (–0.05 points, Figure 4).

Immigrant-generic factors

Shifting the focus to immigrant-generic factors, it was hypothesized that when refugees feel welcome upon arrival, refugees identify more strongly with the host country and less so with their country of origin. In line with *H3b*, our findings indicate that refugees who felt more

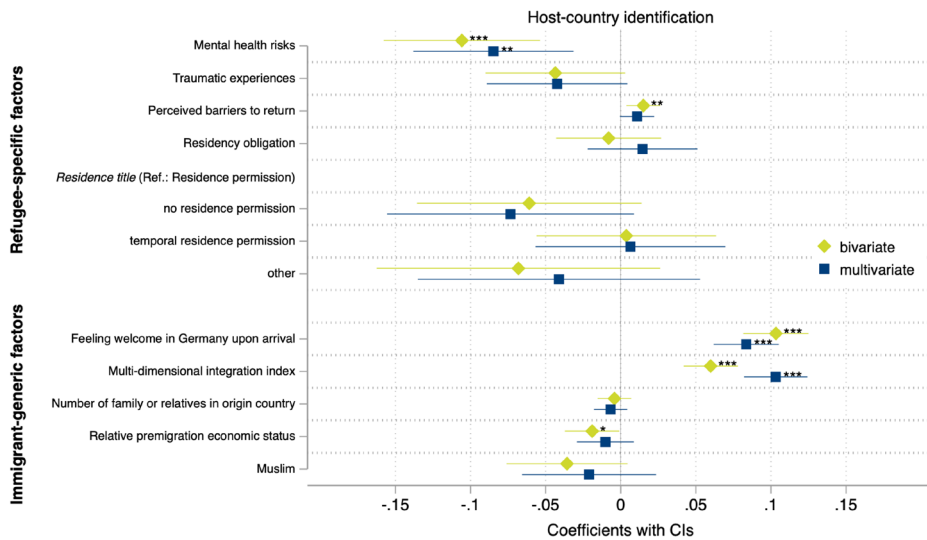


Figure 3. Estimated coefficients on host-country identification (with 95% CIs).

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-sided tests). Results from the growth curve models, Model 2 in Online Appendix Table A4. Models additionally control for length of stay in Germany, arrival age, years of education before arrival, gender, origin-country group, and survey sample. Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (v39).

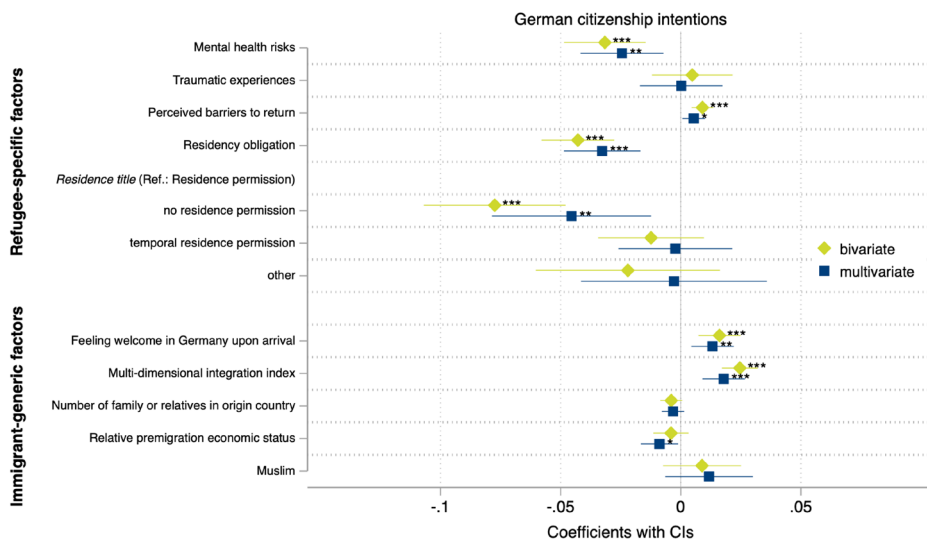


Figure 4. Estimated coefficients on the German citizenship intentions (with 95% CIs).

Notes: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$ (two-sided tests). Results from the growth curve models, Model 3 in Online Appendix Table A4. Models additionally control for length of stay in Germany, arrival age, years of education before arrival, gender, origin-country group, and survey sample. Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (v39).

welcome upon arrival identify more strongly as German (+0.08 points., Figure 3) and express a stronger intention to acquire German citizenship (+0.01 points, Figure 4). We do not find a significant association between feeling welcome upon arrival and origin-country identification, however (Figure 2).

Aligning with expectations *H5*, refugees who score higher on a multidimensional integration index have weaker origin-country identification (−0.05 points, Figure 2) and heightened host-country identification (+0.10 points, Figure 3), along with a higher intention to acquire citizenship (+0.03 points, Figure 4).

Furthermore, we hypothesized that social ties with the country of origin positively correlate with stronger origin-country identification (*H6*). Consistent with *H6*, refugees with a larger number of family and friends in their country of origin identify more strongly with their country of origin (+0.11 points, [Figure 2](#)), while the relationships with host-country identification and intentions to acquire citizenship are insignificant ([Figures 3 and 4](#)).

According to *H7a* and *H7b*, experiences of status loss and affiliation with Islam are related to stronger origin-country identification and weaker host-country identification. Confirming this, refugees with relatively high premigration status identify more strongly with their country of origin (+0.10 points, [Figure 2](#)) and exhibit less inclination toward obtaining German citizenship (−0.01 points, [Figure 4](#)). Further support for *H7b* is evident in an elevated origin-country identification of refugees affiliated with Islam compared to non-Muslims (+0.22 points, [Figure 2](#)). Neither premigration status nor religious identification significantly correlates with host-country identification ([Figures 3 and 4](#)), which is partially against *H7a* and *H7b*.

Robustness results

To verify the robustness of our findings, we conducted several checks involving alternative measurements of the dependent variable and different modeling strategies. Specifically, we re-estimate models presented in [Figures 2–4](#) using logit, ordered logit, and OLS models. We treated the dependent variable as a binary outcome for the logit model and a continuous variable for the ordered logit and OLS models. The replication of our benchmark model with these alternative modeling strategies generally confirms our results (see Online Appendix [Table A5](#)).

It could be argued that because many refugees left their country of origin under taxing circumstances with limited prospects of return, the low and decreasing identification with the origin country is not surprising. We therefore looked descriptively at alternative measures of origin-country and host-country identification: missing people in origin country and feeling close to people in Germany. As shown in [Figure 5](#), initially, a larger proportion of refugees

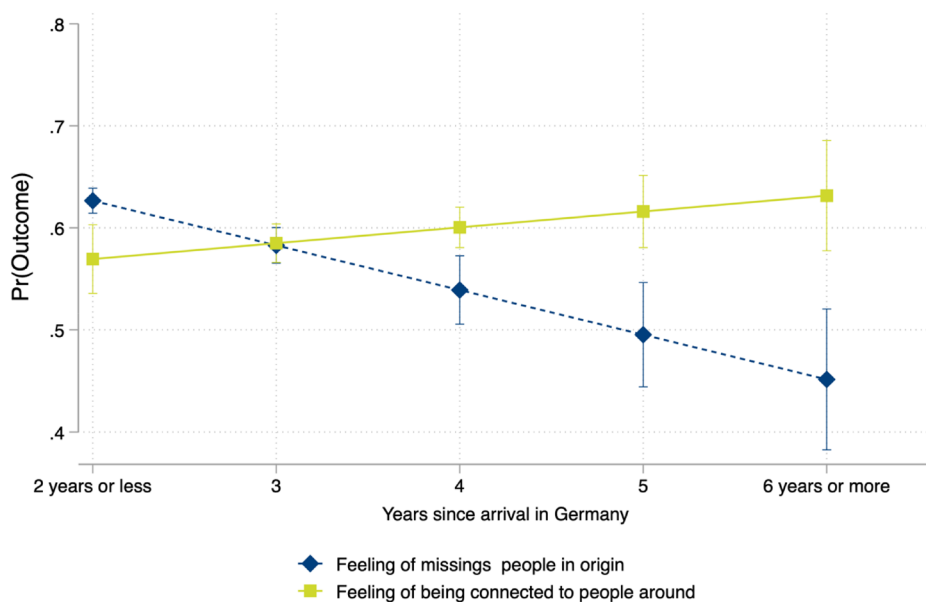


Figure 5. Distribution of the feeling of being connected to people around and missing people in the origin country.

Notes: Adjusted prediction from linear probability regression with robust standard errors clustered at the individual level. Data source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (v39).

reported missing people in their country of origin (63%) compared to feeling connected to people in Germany (57%). Over time, however, this trend reverses, with more refugees feeling connected to people in Germany (63% after 6 or more years; not statistically significant change) and fewer refugees missing people in their country of origin (45% after 6 or more years; statistically significant change at $p < 0.001$). The decrease in feeling of missing people in the country of origin and an increase in feeling close to people in Germany align with our findings of declining origin-country identification, along with rising host-country identification and intentions to acquire German citizenship. However, because the identification questions were asked among selected respondents only, we refrained from using them to replicate our benchmark model.

Conclusions

Numerous studies emphasize the importance of immigrants' identification with their country of origin and host country for their integration outcomes. Although there is ample research on the determinants of origin-country and host-country identification among immigrants broadly, research specifically focusing on refugee groups remains limited. In particular, little is known about refugee-specific factors, i.e., factors that strongly or even exclusively affect refugees. This study addresses this gap by investigating the origin-country and host-country identification process among recent refugees in Germany and their intentions to acquire host-country citizenship. Drawing on prior research on immigrants' identification, we distinguish between (a) refugee-specific factors and (b) immigrant-generic factors (i.e., determinants applicable to both to refugee and non-refugee immigrants). Several conclusions emerge from our study.

First, refugee-specific factors play a crucial role in shaping origin-country and host-country identification, as well as intentions to acquire citizenship. Mental health and experiences of trauma are particularly significant in this process. Refugees experiencing poorer mental health tend to report stronger origin-country identification. However, the experience of trauma appears to weaken origin-country identification rather than reinforce it. A possible explanation for this finding is that traumatic events often involve violence from state agents such as the military or police, as well as exploitation by co-national smugglers (IOM, MMC, and UNHCR, 2024). Experiencing harm from co-nationals may undermine attachment to one's ethnic group rather than strengthen it. Unfortunately, our data do not include information about the sources of refugees' traumatic experiences which limit our ability to examine this alternative interpretation. Additionally, poorer mental health is associated not only with stronger origin-country identification but also with weaker national identification and a reduced likelihood of obtaining German citizenship.

In contrast to our expectation, we do not find that uncertainty of awaiting an asylum decision is linked to stronger origin-country identification. However, those who receive a negative decision exhibit both lower origin-country identification and weaker intentions to acquire German citizenship. This suggests that refugees facing asylum rejection may perceive themselves as belonging to neither their country of origin nor their host country, placing them in a marginalized position.

Perceiving barriers to return also shapes identification patterns among refugees. We find no evidence that refugees who perceive significant obstacles to returning exhibit lower origin-country identification. However, perceptions of these barriers are positively associated with both host-country identification and the likelihood of acquiring citizenship. This finding aligns with previous research in the Netherlands, which suggests that ongoing conflict in the country of origin discourages asylum seekers from planning to return, thereby increasing their identification with the host country (Leerkes et al., 2011).

Legal residency restrictions further influence refugees' identification processes. Specifically, we find that these legal constraints negatively impact refugees' intentions to acquire German citizenship. However, we do not find that such restrictions significantly affect origin-country or host-country identification. While legal barriers may discourage formal belonging through

citizenship, they do not necessarily disrupt refugees' broader identification with their country of origin or host nation.

Second, while refugee-specific factors have rarely been explored, our findings on broader immigrant-related factors generally align with previous research on origin-country and host-country identification among immigrants. More specifically, in line with previous research, feeling welcome upon arrival increases host-country identification and intentions to acquire German citizenship (Hochman & Davidov, 2014; Leszczensky et al., 2019) but does not affect origin-country identification. We also find that refugees who reported a higher economic status in their country of origin and those who are Muslim identify more strongly with their country of origin. Additionally, there is some evidence that a higher economic status in the country of origin reduces intentions to acquire citizenship. Our findings on the role of Muslim affiliation in origin-country identification align with previous studies showing that Muslims tend to exhibit stronger origin-country identification compared to non-religious minorities in Europe (Fleischmann et al., 2019). Interestingly, Muslim refugees do not report weaker host-country identification or lower intentions to acquire German citizenship. In line with previous studies, ties with family and friends in the country of origin also contribute to stronger origin-country identification (Vertovec, 2001). Meanwhile, refugees who score higher on a multidimensional integration index tend to identify less with their country of origin and more with the host country. They also exhibit a stronger intention to acquire German citizenship. This supports the idea that greater social, cultural, and economic integration is associated with stronger host-country identification and weaker origin-country identification.

Taken together, our study finds that both refugee-specific factors and immigrant-generic factors shape identification processes and citizenship intentions among refugees. For example, health risks and traumatic experiences as well as barriers to return are significantly related to origin-country and host-country identifications, and this affects refugees mainly. At the same time, many of the pre- and postmigration factors, such as premigration economic status, being Muslim, and progressed multidimensional integration, also influence identification and citizenship intentions, affecting both refugees and other migrant groups. We see strong grounds for generalizing our findings beyond the German context. Key factors such as trauma, asylum-related uncertainty, and perceived (un)welcomeness have shown consistent associations with self-identification across various receiving countries. Moreover, while Germany initially displayed high levels of public welcome, this shifted rapidly, toward 'revived patterns of hostility and suspicion' (Vollmer & Karakayali, 2018), paralleling developments in other European countries (Czymara, 2021). Likewise, no empirical evidence suggests that Merkel's 2015 decision increased refugee inflows; rather, it was an endogenous policy response to an existing refugee crisis (Tjaden & Heidland, 2025), making it unlikely that our findings reflect a specific attachment of refugees to Germany or Merkel.

Third, our study provides also further insights into theoretical mechanisms underlying origin-country and host-country identification and citizenship intentions (for a summarizing overview of the underlying mechanism, hypothesized relationships, and results, refer to Online Appendix Table A6). Within the insecurity framework, mental health risks positively associate with origin-country identification among refugees. However, other insecurity indicators—experience of trauma and uncertain prospects of staying—turned out negative and statistically insignificant, respectively. As argued earlier, the negative link with trauma may reflect complex connection between refugees' traumas and events in their origin country.

Regarding the role of origin-country conditions, our findings show no significant relationship between perceived barriers to return and origin-country identification. However, although it was not part of our initial hypotheses, we do observe that a greater number of perceived barriers increases the likelihood of intending to obtain German citizenship. This pattern suggests that when refugees perceive substantial obstacles to returning home—such as persistent insecurity, inadequate governance, or limited economic opportunities—they view 'going back' as increasingly unrealistic. Consequently, long-term residence in the host country becomes more likely, making

citizenship acquisition a pragmatic strategy for securing stable legal status. Meanwhile, our results also confirm that for refugees, having still ties with family and friends in their country of origin plays a key role in their origin-country identification.

Within the rejection-identification framework, Muslim affiliation and premigration economic status are positively correlated with origin-country identification but not with host-country identification or citizenship intentions (Muslim affiliation only). Conversely, factors like residency obligations and feeling welcome, which significantly predict host-country identification and citizenship intentions, show no significant correlation with origin-country identification. A more convincing pattern emerges with the assimilation framework, where multidimensional integration index positively correlates with host-country identification and citizenship intentions and negatively with origin-country identification.

Fourth, while some findings support the notion that origin- and host-country identification may develop in opposing directions, this assumption does not hold consistently. For instance, multidimensional integration is positively associated with host-country identification and negatively with origin-country identification and citizenship intentions, aligning with the idea of a trade-off between the two. However, ties with family and friends in the country of origin are positively related to origin-country identification yet show no negative association with host-country identification or citizenship intentions. Similarly, uncertainty while awaiting an asylum decision is associated with both lower origin-country identification and weaker citizenship intentions, indicating that refugees at risk of rejection may feel disconnected from both contexts—placing them in a position of marginalization.

Fifth, we uncovered shared factors and mechanisms influencing host-country identification and citizenship intentions among refugees. Specifically, feeling welcome upon arrival and multidimensional integration positively relate to host-country identification and citizenship intentions, while the relationship between mental health risks and the two outcomes is negative. While our data do not allow us to examine the motives behind refugee naturalization, these findings undermine the idea of strategic naturalization among refugees (Harpaz & Mateos, 2019; Sredanovic, 2022). However, deviations exist concerning residency obligation, and premigration economic status. It is important to note that these differences may arise from an insufficient variation in the citizenship intentions variable, with most refugees expressing strong intentions to acquire German citizenship (between 87 and 93%, depending on the length of stay).

Three limitations of our study necessitate further research. First, we examined connections with family or relatives in the origin country, but refugees may not only have family left in the origin country but also scattered around the globe (Shams, 2020). Future research should explore the role of these connections outside the origin country on identification processes, potentially leveraging the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees used in this study. Second, by focusing exclusively on refugees within Germany, the influence of broader country-contextual factors that might affect identification processes remains unexplored. Cross-national research is needed to examine the impact of reception contexts. Third, future research could advance our findings by adopting a group-comparative approach examining a single-origin group arriving in the same period for different reasons. For instance, Turks in the Netherlands include both refugees and economic or family-reunification migrants. For example, one could study the identification patterns of Turks in the Netherlands who are one of the largest refugee-origin groups but have also arrived in substantial numbers as economic family-reunification immigrants. To date, such group-comparative analyses have been rare, largely due to data limitations, but they offer a promising direction for advancing research on immigrant identification.

As societies address the rising numbers of refugees and the challenges of their integration, policymakers can draw valuable lessons from our findings. For instance, improved healthcare access, a more welcoming reception context, and more effort to facilitate socioeconomic and cultural integration may foster refugees' sense of belonging, aiding their integration and inclusion into the host communities. By implementing these measures, societies can not only support refugees in their integration journey but also strengthen social cohesion.

Notes

1. In the literature – particularly in social psychology – various terms are used to describe these concepts. Identification with the country of origin is often referred to as ethnic, heritage, or ingroup identification, while identification with the host country is frequently labeled as national, mainstream, or outgroup identification.
2. Henceforth, the term “refugees” is used colloquially and includes all persons who move to another country for humanitarian reasons (e.g., as refugees or asylum-seekers). The term “non-refugee immigrants” is used to refer to foreign-born individuals who have immigrated to a new country for non-humanitarian reasons. When we use the term “immigrants”, we refer to all immigrants, including both refugees and non-refugee immigrants.
3. In 2020 and 2022, the scale ranged from (0) “not at all” to (10) “very strongly.” Since the scaling of measurements is not comparable, we do not consider corresponding waves.

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Disclosure statement

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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Data availability statement

This study uses the factually anonymous data of waves 2016–2022 of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (v39, doi: 10.5684/soep.iab-bamf-soep-mig.2022). The survey is conducted jointly by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the research data center of the Federal German Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF), and the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW). External researchers may apply for access to these data by submitting a user-contract application to the SOEP Research Data Center (https://www.diw.de/en/diw_02.c.222836.en/data_access_and_order.html). DOI: 10.5684/soep.iab-bamf-soep-mig.2022. Replication codes for data preparation and analyses are available at <https://osf.io/372fk/>.

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