INSTITUTE FOR EMPLOYMENT RESEARCH
The Research Institute of the Federal Employment Agency

IAB Short Policy Report
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In brief

- The second IMPa wave makes it possible to analyse realised emigration: 2.6 % of the immigrants considered had left Germany. Of these emigrants, 60 % returned to their country of origin and 40 % moved onward to another country.
- Emigration intentions are an important early indicator of later emigration: among those who had emigrated by the second wave, almost one in two had had concrete plans to leave Germany in wave 1; among those who later remained in Germany, this applied to only 2 %. At the same time, almost two thirds of those with plans to leave Germany were still in Germany at the follow-up survey.
- The most important reasons for leaving Germany were partnership and family reasons (39 %), burdensome bureaucratic processes (32 %), personal preferences (30 %), work-related reasons (29 %), and the housing market (27 %).
- Many emigrants remain connected to Germany: 53 % stated retrospectively that they would have liked to stay in Germany longer or permanently, and 57 % had considered potential return migration to Germany.
- Emigrants frequently report support needs related to work and careers, language learning, housing searches, administrative procedures, and more accessible information. They also assess immigrants' labour market opportunities more negatively and view residence-related security more critically than those who remained in Germany.

International Mobility Panel of Migrants in Germany (IMPa)

Who stays, who moves on – and why immigrants leave Germany

by Yuliya Kosyakova, Julia Reinold, Theresa Koch, Lukas Olbrich, Katia Gallegos-Torres and Simon Wagner

Not everyone who immigrates to Germany stays permanently. The retention of immigrants in Germany is relevant from a labour market policy perspective, given the growing demand for skilled labour. In the first wave of the International Mobility Panel of Migrants in Germany (IMPa), around 3 % of immigrants had concrete plans to leave Germany, corresponding to a projected 312,000 people. The 2025 follow-up survey now makes it possible for the first time to examine who actually left Germany, where they moved, which reasons were decisive, and whether they can imagine moving back to Germany.

Germany depends on qualified immigration. According to projections, required long-term annual net migration – that is, the difference between immigration to Germany and emigration from Germany - will rise to between 270,000 and 400,000 people (Fuchs et al. 2021; Kubis/Schneider 2024). Recently, however, net migration has declined markedly: in 2025, it stood at 235,000 people, 45 % lower than in 2024, due to declining immigration and largely stable emigration (Destatis 2026). Alongside the recruitment of new workers, this raises the question of how immigrant retention in Germany can be strengthened.

Immigration does not necessarily mean permanent settlement. Some immigrants leave Germany again — either returning to their country of origin or moving onward to another destination country. For policy, it is therefore not only important to understand how many

IMPa
International Mobility Panel of Migrants in Germany

people leave, but also to identify early predictors of emigration, related drivers, and whether return to Germany remains conceivable after departure.

The International Mobility Panel of Migrants in Germany (IMPa) allows for studying these questions repeatedly and over time (Infobox 1). This Short Policy Report links emigration considerations and plans from the first survey wave with actual emigration by the time of the follow-up survey. We refer to migrants who remain in Germany as "stayers" and to those who have left as "leavers". The report analyses destinations of leavers, their reasons for leaving Germany, and potential return migration to Germany.

T1

Intentions to leave Germany and actual emigration by wave 2

Share of persons of working age (18–65), in percent

	Leavers	Stayers	
	Intentions in wave 1	Intentions in wave 1	Intentions in wave 2
With plans to leave Germany in the next 12 months	49	2	3
Considered leaving Germany in the last 12 months, but had no plans to leave	18	28	30
No considerations or plans to leave Germany	33	70	67
Total	100	100	100
Observations	403	14.828	14.828

Notes: The columns "Stayers" refer to persons who were still living in Germany by wave 2. The column "Leavers" refers to persons who had left Germany by wave 2. The first two columns show intentions to leave Germany among those who remained, measured in wave 1 and wave 2 respectively; the third column shows intentions to leave Germany among emigrants in wave 1.

Source: IMPa (cohort 1, waves 1 and 2), weighted. Conversely, emigration can also occur without previously expressed intentions, for example if work-related, family-related, legal or residence-related circumstances change between two survey waves. Accordingly, one third of those who later emigrated had expressed neither considerations nor plans to leave Germany in the first survey wave (see Table 1). Figure: IAB

1

Infobox "IMPa – Data"

The International Mobility Panel of Migrants in Germany (IMPa) is a new representative longitudinal survey of immigrants in Germany (Kosyakova et al. 2025). The study examines retentionremaining, return migration, onward migration and circular migration, as well as related migration intentions, labour market trajectories and integration processes over time. The first IMPa cohort was collated on the basis of the Integrated Employment Biographies (IEB) of the IAB. The target population comprises people of working age, between 18 and 65 years, who had entered Germany by 2 April 2024, did not hold German citizenship at birth, and were registered in the data of the Federal Employment Agency — for example through employment, benefit receipt or participation in labour market programmes. The randomly selected individuals were invited to participate by post and could complete the questionnaire online in 19 languages.

The first survey wave took place between December 2024 and April 2025; the follow-up survey was conducted between November 2025 and February 2026. This makes it possible to link considerations and plans to leave Germany in wave 1 with actual return migration and onward migration behaviour by wave 2. In wave 2, 43 percent of the wave 1 participants took part again. Statistical projection methods allow representative statements about the target population. The analyses use panel weights that account for differences in selection and participation probabilities and adjust the survey data to reference distributions from the IEB. For this article, we consider people who participated in both waves and were of working age in wave 2. This results in a panel dataset of 15,232 respondents. Due to filter routing and item non-response — that is, missing answers to individual questions — the case numbers in individual tables and figures may differ.

Plans to leave Germany are a strong but incomplete early indicator

The follow-up survey allows to link intentions to leave Germany from the first wave with actual return migration and onward migration. By the second wave, 2.6 % of the immigrants considered had left Germany, corresponding to 260,000 people in absolute terms. Table 1 compares stayers' and leavers' intentions to leave Germany as expressed in wave 1. The differences are substantial: among leavers, almost one in two had had plans to leave Germany in wave 1. Among stayers, this applied to only 2 %. Plans to leave Germany are therefore a strong early indicator of later emigration.

At the same time, having plans to leave does not necessarily mean that emigration will actually take place. Among those with plans to leave Germany in wave 1, almost two thirds were still in Germany by the second wave (63 %; not shown). Among those who had only considered leaving Germany, this share was even 95 %. This is not surprising: considerations are softer measures than plans. It shows that emigration is being considered as a possibility, but says little about how serious, concrete or imminent departure actually is (Carling 2024).

At the same time, intentions to leave Germany also remain relevant among stayers. In wave 2.3 % had plans to leave Germany within the next twelve months, while another 30 % had considered leaving Germany during the previous twelve months. Thus, leaving Germany remains an option even among those who have stayed.

Plans and actual emigration differ by groups

Table 2 shows that plans to leave Germany should not simply be understood as an expression of weak integration. Stayers with plans to leave Germany in wave 1 differ clearly from those without such plans: they are more often male, somewhat younger, less often family-anchored in Germany, more often highly educated, more likely to report good or very good English skills, and more often employed. At the same time, they were less likely to have intended to stay in Germany permanently when they moved to the country, and they feel less welcome. Plans to leave Germany therefore do not only point to challenges, but also to mobility resources and weaker attachment to Germany.

Compared with stayers, leavers were on average younger, had lived in Germany for a shorter period, more often had a partner or children abroad, and were less likely to report good or very good German skills, but more likely to report good or very good English skills. Their gross hourly wages were also lower than those of persons who remained in Germany. Differentiating between leavers with and without earlier plans to leave Germany also reveals differences: leavers with earlier plans to leave Germany are more often highly educated, more often have good or very good English skills, more often have German or EU citizenship or a permanent settlement permit, and earned higher gross hourly wages than emigrants without earlier plans. By contrast, leavers without earlier plans were more often actively looking for work, less often had a secure legal residence status, and more often intended to stay in Germany permanently when they moved to the country. The findings thus show that emigration takes different forms: it can reflect planned mobility among persons with greater resources, but it can also arise from uncertain or changing life circumstances.

Return and onward migration follow different destination patterns.

Among leavers, 60 % returned to their country of origin, while 40 % moved onward to another country (not shown). The main destination countries differ markedly between the two groups. Among onward migrants, the largest share moved to Spain (21 %), followed by Switzerland (13 %) and Italy and Croatia (each at 9 %). Return migrants most frequently returned to Croatia (17 %), Turkey (15 %), Poland (11 %) and Romania (9 %). Figure 1 groups these countries into origin and destination regions. It shows that return migration is strongly shaped by the origin structure: many return migrants come from Central and Eastern Europe as well as from other non-EU countries and return to these regions accordingly. Onward migration, by contrast, more often follows a different pattern: it is more strongly directed towards Western and Northern European countries as well as high-income non-EU countries. This finding suggests that return and onward migration not only differ in their destination regions, but may also be associated with different motives and preconditions, as discussed below.

T2

Profile of those who remained in Germany and emigrants by plans to leave Germany in wave 1

Shares and means, in percent, years and euros, based on wave 1 information

	Stayers		Leavers	
	Without plans	With plans	Without plans	With plans
Female	47	37	40	39
Age	40	38	34	37
Has partner	77	62	62	67
Has children	58	38	41	41
Partner or children abroad[1)]	7	23	48	62
Master’s, Diplom or doctoral degree	25	37	18	45
Duration of stay in years	14	12	5	5
German/EU citizenship or permanent settlement permit	72	71	59	84
Good or very good German skills	50	44	31	30
Good or very good English skills	36	58	50	64
Employed	78	84	74	67
Actively looking for work	23	43	36	11
Gross hourly wage[2)]	38	33	26	30
Intended to stay permanently when moving to Germany	46	20	40	9
Feels welcome or very welcome in Germany	67	40	69	43
Observations	14.399	429	176	227

Notes: The columns “Stayers” refer to persons who were still living in Germany by wave 2. The columns “Leavers” refer to persons who had left Germany by wave 2. “With plans” refers to persons with plans to leave Germany in wave 1. “Without plans” includes persons without plans to leave Germany in wave 1, that is, persons who had considered leaving Germany but had no plans to leave, as well as persons who had not considered leaving Germany. All characteristics refer to information from wave 1.

1) Only persons with a partner or children.

2) Only employed persons with valid information on wages and working hours.

Reading example: Among stayers, the share of women without plans to leave Germany was 47 % and the share of women with plans to leave was 37 % in wave 1. Among leavers, the corresponding shares were 40 and 39 %.

Source: IMPa (cohort 1, waves 1 and 2), weighted. Figure: IAB

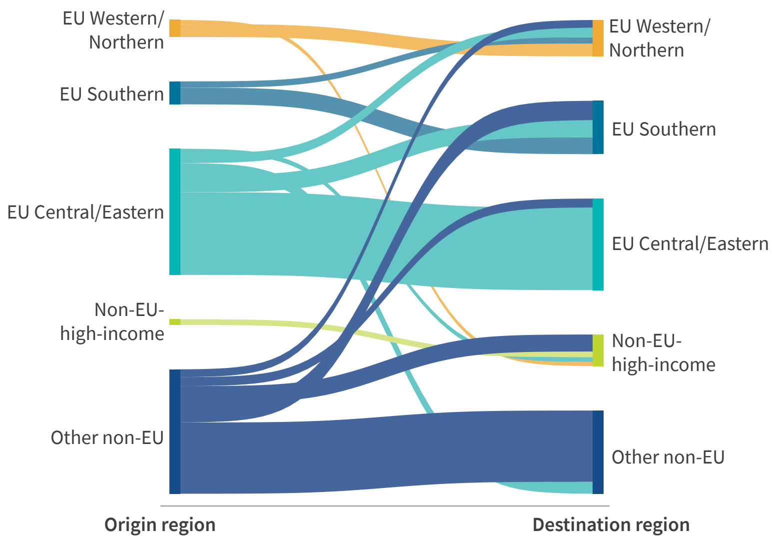
Family reasons are the most important motive for leaving Germany – followed by bureaucratic processes

Individuals rarely leave Germany for a single reason. Leavers could indicate several motives for their departure. Partnership and family reasons were mentioned most frequently: 39 % of leavers reported them as a reason for leaving Germany.

F1

Origin and destination regions of leavers

Shares of leavers, in percent



Source: IMPa (cohort 1, waves 1 and 2), weighted. Observations: 403. Figure: IAB

F2

Reasons for leaving Germany

Shares of leavers of working age (18–65), in percent; multiple answers possible

Source: IMPa (cohort 1, waves 1 and 2), weighted. Observations: 403. Figure: IAB

Burdensome bureaucratic processes follow in second place, at 32 %. Personal preferences (e.g., climate and lifestyle), and own work-related reasons each follow at just under 30 %, while the housing market was mentioned by 27 % (Figure 2).

The reasons differ depending on whether leavers already had plans to leave Germany in wave 1 (not shown). Among those without earlier plans, partnership and family reasons also rank first (32 %), followed by burdensome bureaucratic processes (29 %). Work-related reasons, personal preferences and the housing market, by contrast, are mentioned less frequently among persons who already had plans to leave Germany in wave 1. It is also notable that residence-related reasons are mentioned more often among leavers without earlier plans (18 % compared with 5 %). This shows that emigration without earlier plans is also often linked to understandable challenges or constraints; whether these emerged only after participation in the first wave cannot be determined with the available data.

Overall, the findings point to a mixed picture. Some emigration is linked to personal circumstances that are beyond the influence of policy. At the same time, many leavers mention reasons that are more closely connected to conditions in Germany – in particular burdensome bureaucratic processes, work-related prospects, the housing market, language difficulties or experiences of discrimination. These findings underline that no single factor can explain emigration on its own. They do, however, show the areas in which leavers retrospectively perceived challenges or barriers.

Destination choice follows different logics

The reasons for leaving Germany differ from the reasons for choosing the next destination or return country (not shown). Among return migrants, social and familiar contexts are especially important: partnership and family ties are mentioned particularly often (41 %), followed by friends in the country of origin (40 %), personal preferences (35 %), and existing language skills (28 %). Among onward migrants, family reasons

(39 %) and personal preferences (38 %) also play an important role; however, own work-related reasons are mentioned much more often than among return migrants (32 % compared with 17 %).

Many leavers remain connected to Germany

A key finding is that many leavers remain connected to Germany even after their departure. Looking back, 53 % said they would have liked to stay in Germany for longer or even permanently. This share is higher among return migrants than among onward migrants (63 % compared with 38 %). In addition, 57 % of leavers had considered moving back to Germany in the future; here, too, the share is higher among return migrants than among onward migrants (62 % compared with 50 %). Leaving Germany therefore does not necessarily mean cutting ties with the country altogether.

Support needs point to areas for action

Many leavers indicated that they would have needed more support during their stay in Germany. The data does not distinguish whether this was due to support being unavailable, not used, or insufficient from the respondents' perspective. Support with work and career was mentioned most often: 50 % reported additional need in this area (see Figure 3). Around one third mentioned learning German and finding housing, while 30 % mentioned dealing with public authorities or administrative procedures. More easily accessible information about living and working in Germany was also mentioned relatively often. On average, leavers reported 3.6 support needs (median: 3), meaning that needs often occurred in combination. Only just under one fifth reported no need for any further support.

The support profiles of return migrants and onward migrants differ in some areas. The difference is particularly clear for finding housing: 39 % of return migrants stated a need for support in this area, compared with 26 % of onward migrants (not shown). Return migrants also more often mentioned residence-related questions and more easily accessible information. Onward migrants, by contrast, somewhat more often indicated a need for health-related and psychological counselling. The share of those who said that they had not needed any further support differs only slightly: it is 20 % among return migrants and 18 % among onward migrants.

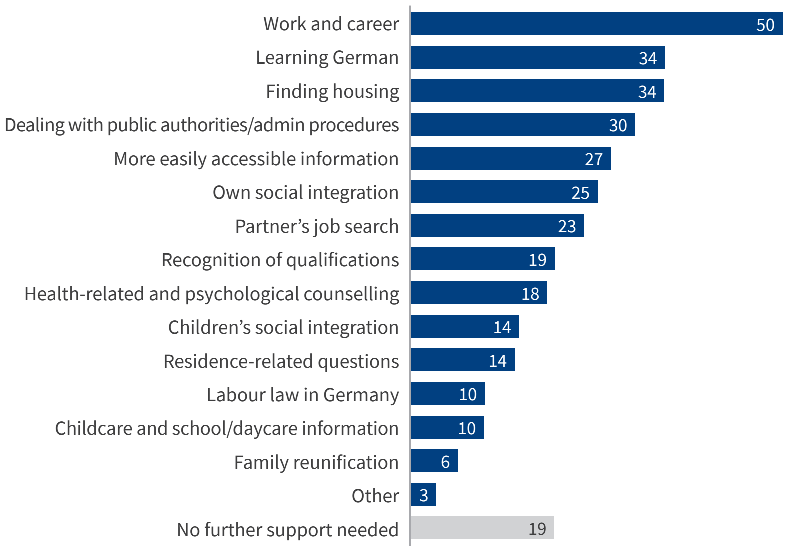
Federal Employment Agency, municipalities and employers are mentioned most often as points of contact

Leavers with support needs most often indicated that they would have liked to receive support from administrative and labour-market-related contact points. 56 % would have wanted support from the Federal Employment Agency or the Jobcenter, 44 % from cities, municipalities or municipal counselling services, and 43 % from their employer (not shown). Other institutions are mentioned less often, but may be relevant for specific groups: the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees was mentioned by 22 %, training institutions or universities by 19 %, and the Federal Foreign Office by 14 %. Schools, daycare centres or kindergartens were mentioned by 11 % of leavers with support

F3

Support needs of leavers during their stay in Germany

Shares of leavers, in percent; multiple answers possible



Notes: Items on childcare, school and daycare information, and children's social integration refer only to persons with children. The item on the partner's job search refers only to persons with a partner.
Source: IMPa (cohort 1, waves 1 and 2), weighted. Observations: 403. Figure: IAB

needs and children. Overall, this points to a broad spectrum of desired support, ranging from labour market counselling and municipal services to education and family-related institutions.

Leavers perceive labour market opportunities and residence-related risks more critically

The reasons for leaving Germany and the support needs mentioned above point to concrete experiences in Germany. Figure 4 complements these findings by showing whether stayers and leavers differ in their general assessments of Germany. The figure shows the share of persons who "fully agree" with each statement.

One striking pattern is that stayers place greater emphasis on German language skills than leavers – both in everyday life and for finding suitable job offers. Leavers, by contrast, assess the labour market opportunities of foreign nationals more critically. They are more likely to fully agree that foreigners have poorer chances in the German labour market. The difference is even more pronounced with regard to residence-related security: leavers are more likely to fully agree that they feared having to leave Germany immediately if they lost their job. These findings point to two areas of tension that are also visible in the reasons for leaving and in the support needs reported above: fair labour market opportunities and residence-related planning security.

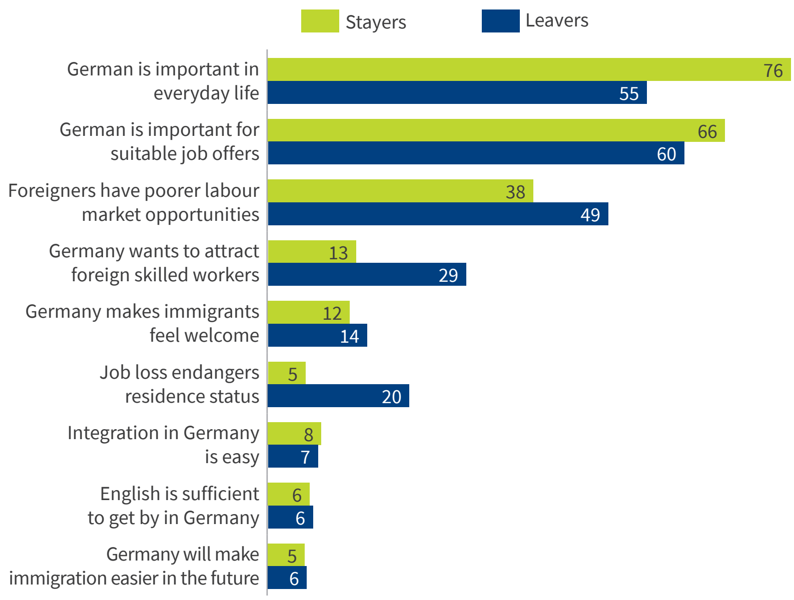
Further distinctions show that return migrants and onward migrants do not share the same assessments in all respects (not shown). Return migrants are particularly likely to fully agree that job loss would have endangered their residence in Germany (24 % compared with 14 %). Onward migrants, by contrast, are much less likely to fully agree that integration in Germany is easy (2 % compared with 10 %). Both groups of emigrants are more likely than those who remained in Germany to fully agree that Germany wants to attract foreign skilled workers (29 % in each group compared with 13 %). This does not point to an overall more negative image of Germany among leavers. Rather, it shows specific differences in perceptions of language, labour market opportunities, integration and residence-related security.

At the same time, full agreement with some statements remains low in all groups. Few respondents fully agree that Germany makes immigrants feel welcome, that English is sufficient in Germany, or that immigration will become easier in the future (see Figure 4). The differences between stayers and leavers therefore relate less to a general image of Germany than to specific institutional and labour-market-related conditions.

F4

Assessments of Germany by mobility status

Shares of persons who fully agree, in percent



Notes: The figure shows the share of persons who stated that they "fully agree". The remaining response categories ("somewhat agree", "somewhat disagree" and "strongly disagree") were grouped together.
Source: IMPa (cohort 1, waves 1 and 2), weighted. Observations: 15.232. Figure: IAB

Discussion

The first two IMPa waves show that emigration from Germany among immigrants is quantitatively limited within the short observation period, but remains relevant from a labour market policy perspective: by the second wave, 2.6 % of the immigrants considered had left Germany, corresponding to 260,000 people in absolute terms. At the same time, the profile analyses show that plans to leave Germany should not simply be equated with weak integration. They also occur among employed persons with greater resources who have international mobility options. Moreover, emigration does not necessarily mean return to the country of origin: 60 % of emigrants returned, while 40 % moved onward to another country. Return and onward migration follow different destination patterns and drivers and should therefore be distinguished both analytically and politically.

At the same time, emigration is only partly predictable. Plans to leave Germany are a strong early indicator: among those who later emigrated, almost one in two had already expressed such plans in the first wave. However, almost two thirds of those with plans to leave Germany were still in Germany by the follow-up survey. This may be because the time between the two waves was too short for some plans to be implemented, because life circumstances changed, or because people abandoned their plans. Conversely, one third of leavers had previously reported neither considerations nor plans to leave Germany. Emigration without prior planning should therefore not be understood as random: it may be linked to new work-related, family-related, legal or residence-related developments – and does not always reflect a voluntarily chosen mobility strategy.

The reasons given for leaving Germany underline this complexity. Partnership and family reasons rank first, at 39 %, and point to private life circumstances that can only be influenced by policy to a limited extent. Burdensome bureaucratic processes follow in second place, at 32 %. Other reasons include personal preferences, work-related reasons, the housing market, language difficulties and experiences of discrimination. Emigration therefore does not appear to result from a single factor, but from the interplay of personal ties, individual prospects and institutional conditions in Germany.

A notable finding is that emigration does not necessarily imply a complete loss of connection to Germany. Looking back, 53 % of leavers said they would have liked to stay in Germany for longer or permanently; 57 % had considered moving back to Germany in the future. The findings on perceptions of Germany also do not suggest that leavers have a generally more negative image of the country. Rather, specific differences emerge: leavers assess the labour market opportunities of foreign nationals more critically and more often perceive residence-related risks in the event of job loss. Policies aimed at strengthening immigrants' attachment to Germany should therefore not only focus on whether immigrants find work, but also on whether they perceive fair opportunities, planning security and institutional openness.

The support needs reported by leavers indicate where institutions could take action. The most frequently mentioned areas are work and career, language acquisition, housing search, administrative procedures and more easily accessible information. The most important points of contact mentioned are the Federal Employment Agency or the Jobcenter, municipalities and employers. This means that some starting points lie at the local level, for example with municipal counselling services, employers and regional labour market actors. At the same time, the federal level remains important for providing reliable and multilingual information, making responsibilities more transparent and better coordinating support services.

The findings do not provide causal evidence that specific measures prevent or trigger emigration. They do, however, show the areas in which leavers retrospectively perceived frictions and where policy, administration and employers can take action to strengthen prospects of remaining in Germany. Future IMPa waves will show whether considerations of moving back to Germany actually lead to return migration to Germany and which factors contribute to immigrants staying permanently, moving onward or returning to their country of origin. Securing skilled labour should therefore not only be considered from the perspective of immigration, but also from the perspective of staying, leaving and possibly returning to Germany.

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