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Becoming and Belonging? Lived experiences of naturalization and the implementation of citizenship law in Germany and Canada

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At the time this thesis is being submitted (July 2024), the biggest overhaul of German citizenship law since the seismic changes of 2000 is coming into force. Parts of the reform unquestionably signal progressive changes in German citizenship policy: the residence requirement has been shortened from eight to five years and – no doubt the most important legal change – applicant no longer have to relinquish their other citizenship(s). Millions of Turkish nationals, many of whom have lived in Germany for decades, will now be able to gain German nationality without giving up their Turkish citizenship. The 'state mandated identity crisis' is, as so succinctly put by my interviewee Filiz, no longer. The next few years will show whether the hurdle of mono-nationality was truly the issue holding back so many residents in Germany from becoming citizens.

But as we have seen in many other democratic states reforming their citizenship law: liberalization rarely comes without drawbacks. Or as Germany's Minister of Justice, Marco Buschmann, summarized the reform: 'The acquisition of German citizenship will be faster in the future – but also more difficult' (Strauss, 2023). When the proposal for the reform was first circulated, the German Institute for Human Rights (DIfM, *Deutsches Institut für Menschenrechte*) flagged the policy changes concerning the financial requirements for naturalization. Prior legislation had allowed for the naturalization of individuals who receive social benefits if 'the recourse to such benefits is due to conditions beyond his or her control'. This exception has been stricken. Instead, the Nationality Act now waives this condition for immigrants who either (1) came to German as a contract worker or as the spouse of a contract worker prior to 1990 (or 'not long after'), (2) have been employed full-time for at least 20 out of the last 24 months, or (3) are the spouse or registered civil partner of a person fulfilling the second condition and live 'with that person and a minor child as a family unit'.

The DIfM notes that the new formulation allows for the discrimination of disabled people unable to be full-time employed, those caring for sick or elderly family members, students attending school or other formal education that does not provide them with a livable wage, as well as single parents whose full-time employment would put their children at risk (DIfM, 2023). Buschmann justified the change stating that financial independence is a key part of integration, which in turn is a requirement 'for the German passport', and that those who are hardworking and diligent should be rewarded (Strauss,

2023). His justification underlines the criticism voiced by the DIfM. Citizens are people who work – if one is unable to work, one cannot be a citizen – and ‘work’ denotes paid labor, not unpaid labor like care work. It is a worrying development that civic rights will be especially difficult to access for those in the most precarious circumstances. Citizenship based on economic merit in a country of income inequality like Germany, where the poorest 50 percent earned 15.9 percent of all income in 2016, seems grotesque (Frieden et al., 2023).

While the removal of the exception concerning circumstances outside the applicant’s control could be (generously) interpreted as an effort to reduce caseworkers’ workload, another proposal by the Minister of the Interior, Nancy Faeser, would add significant labor for those working in Foreigners’ Offices and naturalization departments. Faeser plans to ease the revocation of residence permits if individuals endorse or express approval of a terror act. Said endorsement does not have to be actively voiced through the creation of content but, according to the drafted government policy, a ‘like’ on a social media platform would be sufficient (*Tagesspiegel*, 2024). Disregarding the time and expertise needed to effectively screen an applicant’s entire online presence, lowering the threshold of an offence triggering deportation to a ‘like’ expressed through a single click signals the persistence of the securitization of immigration and increased crimmigration. The proposal dismally reiterates my argument made in Chapter 2, crimmigration systems require researchers to evaluate immigration and citizenship policies not only based on their content, but also in how far they are interwoven with criminal law. As Germany makes a significant step towards the civic inclusion of all its long-term residents, those structurally disadvantaged must not be excluded from formal membership and a person’s entire existence within a state should not be reduced to a single click.