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Communicating Science for Migration Policy: Refugee Protection in Germany 2015 and 2022

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Abstract

The relationship between researchers and policymakers has never been straightforward when it comes to using the best evidence to solve societal problems. This paper examines this relationship by analysing two major refugee events in Germany: the arrival of Middle Eastern refugees in 2015 and Ukrainian refugees in 2022. Using communication theories, we analyze how policymakers engaged with scientific research and the institutional mechanisms that facilitated or hindered knowledge transfer. Based on policy document analysis and expert interviews, we identify key differences in policy responses across both events. In 2015, scientific evidence was sparse, and policymakers primarily relied on legal perspectives. By contrast, in 2022, a well-developed research infrastructure allowed for a more immediate integration of empirical scientific insights into policy. However, political and institutional selectivity in processing evidence persisted. Our findings highlight the need for closer collaboration between researchers and policymakers and improved mechanisms for translating scientific knowledge into policy.

Keywords

Science Communication; Policymaking; Refugees; Germany; Policy Advice

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Introduction

The relationship between researchers and policymakers has never been straightforward when it comes to using the best evidence to solve societal problems. In Germany, for example, the last 20 years have seen an increase in the number of governmental scientific advisory bodies. This trend not only indicates a heightened level of interaction but emphasizes also the need for a more nuanced understanding of this connection (Falk et al. 2019). The relationship between scientific research and policymaking is particularly evident in the field of migration and integration policies addressing refugees (see Hamilton et al. 2020). The unpredictable nature of many of the events that generate refugees is often portrayed by governmental and administrative actors as political crises that require rapid decision-making in situations with incomplete information. For research to be useful in such contexts, it ‘requires the suppliers of evidence to see the world from the perspective of their audience and understand the policy process in which they engage’ (Cairney & Kwiatkowski 2017).

When refugees from the Middle East arrived in increasing numbers at German borders in the summer of 2015, the humanitarian catastrophe for these people not only led to immediate administrative measures to support refugees but also initiated a process of policy changes in the following years. In 2022, Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine was another refugee-generating event affecting many European countries. Germany, in particular, quickly became the country within the European Union (EU) hosting the largest number of Ukrainian refugees, again leading to changes of its previously established migration and integration policy. In 2022, however, the historical experience of 2015 arguably enabled a more structured response in terms of communicating scientific evidence and respective policymaking.

In this paper, we explore how the German federal government utilized scientific evidence during these two events. To do so, we draw on communication theories to outline the use of evidence by policymakers, focusing primarily on the selectivity of information processing theory. Our analysis is based on a review of the literature and policy documents, complemented by interviews with policymakers and scientific advisors. In the following sections, we begin by reviewing communication theories and exploring their application in understanding policymaking. We then turn our focus on Germany’s experiences with refugees in 2015 and 2022. Based on selected policy issues during both periods, we analyse the policy priorities that influenced governmental information requirements and assess the utilization or omission of available scientific information. Next, we describe the research evidence that was produced and how it was framed and presented according to policy demand. This includes whether it addressed policy problems at the appropriate time and reached the relevant government departments. In conclusion, we reflect on how research and policy have interacted and consider whether these experiences confirm the selectivity of information processing theory.

Communication theory, science and policymaking

Policymakers operate under significant time constraints and immense political pressure. They employ heuristics that enable them to process vast amounts of information in a practical manner (Cairney & Kwiatkowski 2017). Building upon models of the policy-knowledge nexus (Boswell & Smith 2017), our aim in this paper is to provide in-depth insights into how the autonomous sphere of policymaking selectively perceives research findings using communication theories, which share basic assumptions on cognition combined with the policy learning approach (Witting 2017). In following these theories, policymakers build on existing beliefs and knowledge (Scheufele 2014; Zampini 2018; Schäfer et al. 2019). Scientific evidence is selected, processed and interpreted according to ‘policymaking’ criteria of relevance. Thereby political actors do not only accept, but also construct the legitimacy of the presented evidence (Bandola-Gill 2023, Hillmann et al. 2024). This process has also been theorized as frame building – i.e., an interpretation (frame) wins over competing options for interpreting a problem (Hänggli 2012, Matthes 2012). Actors use

policy frames drawing on ‘institutional action frames’ of ‘their’ organization or entity ([Björnehead & Erikson 2018](#)). This theory of selectivity is grounded in cognitive dissonance theory and highlights three selection criteria. First, individuals actively look for information confirming their pre-existing opinions while avoiding or neglecting sources that do not align with one’s belief. Second, professional experience is another selection criterion. This includes not only professional expertise in a specific subject but also understanding of organizational guidelines and practices. Third, in the event of sudden need of information due to unexpected events, practical utility may outweigh selectivity, or rather add practicality as another aspect of selectivity ([Yeo et al. 2015](#)).

In migration and integration policies addressing refugees, the political and public circumstances under which expertise is used are particularly volatile and contentious. This includes changes in the origin countries of refugees, as well as fluctuations in the scale of their numbers. But it also includes changes with respect to politically mobilising actors and potentially overlapping policy issues that all must be addressed simultaneously including aspects like the labour market, public services, and border management ([Slootjes & Zanzuchi 2023](#), [Amelung et al. 2024](#)). From the local to the supranational level, migration and integration policymaking is nested and negotiated in parallel on different subjects. It is a distributed process engaging many stakeholders from different sectors and governing levels ([Ansell et al. 2024](#), [Bazurli et al. 2022](#)). Additionally, issue salience and preferences can change quickly with new political and public circumstances leading to shifts in political preferences ([Hatton 2021](#)). Researchers serving as scientific advisors in this policy field have been found to be much more inclined towards normative assessments compared to researchers in other policy fields. This could be due to higher normative expectations during advisory work, or simply because research in this field tends to be more normative by nature ([Jungblut et al. 2024](#)).

Our focus is on the interaction between federal government officials and researchers. Their interaction is, regarding the perspective of the government, shaped by a simultaneous interaction with other actors, such as parliamentarians, journalists, and interest groups. Our interest is primarily in such third-party interaction that provides further routes for researchers into policymaking. Third parties may introduce or reference research, potentially either supporting or undermining the reception of such research in the policymaking process.

In Germany, migration and integration policies addressing refugees were not a prominent topic of social science research for a long time. The 1980s and 1990s focused on the right to asylum enshrined in the German Basic Law, with political scientists and legal scholars dominating the academic debates ([Hailbronner 1993](#); [Joppke 1999](#)) and an obvious lack of sociological studies about the people affected ([Hillmann 2024](#)). Juridical asylum literature was influenced by various legal initiatives and changes in the European human rights convention, the Geneva convention, EU law, and an increasing number of cases pending at administrative courts ([Thränhardt 2023](#)). The few existing sociological studies on refugees were mostly disconnected from general social science research on migration and integration, which had focused on immigrants who had lived in Europe for a longer time. This situation did not change significantly until numbers of refugees began to increase starting in the early 2010s onwards. At that time, the few existing sociological studies focused, for example, on specific groups of refugees like minors or refugees with precarious legal status. Existing research findings tended to be somewhat idiosyncratic, fragmented, their parts not relatable and hardly generalizable. Accordingly, there was no valid and robust empirically based corpus of knowledge specifically on the lives and integration of refugees, nor on reasons why the refugee movement had increased so much ([Johansson et al. 2016](#); [Kleist 2017](#)). Notably, ‘a major reason for the relatively scarce coverage of refugee topics in German sociology journals [...] [had] been a lack of high-quality data’ ([Kogan & Kalter 2020](#)).

Drawing from insights in communication theory, we anticipate that in 2015, policymakers in Germany continued to uphold the existing migration policy framework held in ‘their’ organisation. However, they

may have also been more receptive to new ideas that could aid in addressing the integration of incoming refugees. Empirically, their frame building may be differentiated along two lines: (1) the existing political programme of the federal government, as laid down in the coalition agreement or in the programmes of the political party to which the head of a particular government department belongs; and (2) the professional background and mandate of the particular government departments. The latter includes whether administration views research evidence as neutral or in line with governmental opinions (which in both cases would be fitting) or practical (relevant and timely). We will analyse which cues have guided the selection of evidence and how political goals are defined and translated into administrative action. Such cues include coalition agreements, ad-hoc cabinet decisions following unexpected events, media debates, or parliamentary inquiries – knowledge that is rarely represented in academic research. But migration and integration policies addressing refugees are also historical phenomena: policymakers and the public interact differently at varying points in time. There may be lessons from previous political events and the availability of research may vary. For these reasons, a comparison of 2015 with the mass flight following Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine in 2022 is particularly instructive. In comparing the events of 2015 to 2022, we ask in what ways did the scientific evidence and governmental information needs align or not?

Methodology

To examine the role of scientific evidence in policymaking, we adopted a qualitative methodology that involved policy documents analysis and interviews with experts in the field. 'Scientific evidence' is defined here as any empirically grounded information or knowledge product in the policy process that is delivered by or obtained from academic sources, be it in written, visual, or oral form. This includes consultations of academic experts to meaningfully interpret situations about which there is no evidence yet available, but where they rely on former work and experience. Legal drafts and other publicly available policy documents as outcomes alone cannot serve this purpose. Therefore, an account of direct perception can be provided by expert interviews. While being limited to an individual's experience, this provides an understanding of how information is actually handled and perceived. As policymaking is a formalised process, it can be expected to follow internal rules and thus be valid beyond idiosyncrasies.

In a first step, a literature review served the purpose of identifying relevant actors, debates, and contentious issues. It helped to understand the policy processes in 2015 and 2022 as outcomes of 'internal' considerations and shed light on known policy priorities, often in the form of non-codified knowledge. For this reason, we build on published quantitative analyses of public parliamentary debates that helped to understand the prevailing views in the governing parties.

In a second step, policy documents were selected and analysed in order to prepare for the interviews, and then clarify and validate steps and positions that interviewees would discuss. These documents are publicly available from institutes' websites, the parliamentary database, and from a platform which provides administrative documents which were requested on the basis of the Freedom of Information Act¹ where unpublished internal governmental documents may be obtained. Whereas such documents also serve a rhetorical function within their original realm of use, here, we analyse them as sources.

In a final step, we conducted ten qualitative semi-structured interviews with experts in 2024. These included officials from the Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat (BMI, Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community) who were involved in migration and integration policymaking during 2015 or 2022, from the Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge (BAMF, Federal Office for Migration and Refugees), as well as researchers from migration and integration research institutions who were active in

1 <https://fragdenstaat.de/>: project of the Open Knowledge Foundation Deutschland and a central platform for questions relating to freedom of information in Germany.

policy advice. The interviews were recorded and analysed by qualitative content analysis, in part inductively establishing key interpretative frameworks and relevant knowledge sources that were further validated throughout the interviewing process by consulting experts and discussing among the authors (a similar qualitative approach has been used by, e.g., [Karppinen & Moe 2012](#), for an overview see [Shanahan et al. 2018](#)). The findings were extrapolated in a direct semantic thematic analysis, taking the experts' description at face value, and were triangulated with a complementary analysis of the policy documents to highlight existing information needs.

The arrival of refugees from the Middle East in 2015

The arrival of refugees from the Middle East – mostly Syrians, but also Afghans and Iraqis – began in 2011 but peaked in 2015. After the arrival of refugees fleeing the Balkan wars during the 1990s, the number of people seeking protection in Germany remained comparatively low. Only in 2011 these numbers started to slowly rise again, but it was the suddenness and scale of the event in 2015 that warranted state attention. We first describe which priorities policymakers set, which interpretation of the situation guided them, and how governmental officials viewed their role as users of evidence. Then, we discuss the research evidence available at the onset of the refugee arrival, and which evidence gaps were addressed in the following years. Finally, we examine whether and how the landscape of research changed and whether academic research was at all able to potentially serve information needs of the federal government in 2015 and the time after.

POLICYMAKERS AND INFORMATION NEEDS

During the arrival of refugees from the Middle East in 2015, the main actors within the federal government responsible for migration and integration policies addressing refugees were the BMI, and the Bundesministerium für Arbeit und Soziales (BMAS, Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs). While the BMI deals with migration as such, i.e., arrival at the German or EU borders, but also with asylum processes, the provision of integration and language classes, with integration aspects such as religious diversity and societal cohesion, the BMAS takes responsibility over migrants' access to the labour market and the social security system. Additionally, the Beauftragte der Bundesregierung für Migration, Flüchtlinge und Integration (IntB, Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees, and Integration) – although not responsible for administering large funds or drafting legislation – is a policymaking advocate placed within the Chancellery.

In interviews, governmental officials pointed out that as part of their oversight role for federally funded research institutions, they keep themselves informed on research agendas, publications and other output. Depending on the degree of statutory independence of the specific research institution, they also engage in discussing topics and output. However, it becomes clear from the interviews that the supervisory units are not necessarily involved in refugee policymaking. The actual policy units, on the other hand, view studies from within their 'own' ministerial portfolio mostly as obligatory readings. Frequent staff changes, but also changes in political demands, further complicate matching external evidence sources and internal use. Mutual interest often leads to further interaction: Governmental officials can and do request information on topics of interest at the federal institutes or from other researchers. This can range from formal requests to informal phone calls with individual researchers. Additionally, researchers who have been interviewed state that they have taken the initiative to engage in regular exchanges with specialist units, sharing insights and studies.

The interviewed policymakers stated that, before 2015 the perception of a 'quiet' time prevailed. Refugees received minimal governmental attention, as evidenced in the diminished administrative capacities not only at the federal level but also down to the local level ([Hillmann 2024](#)). Policymaking by the German federal government had shifted to the level of the EU and concentrated on the implementation of European

directives into national legislation ([Ette 2017](#)). Next to these Europeanized aspects of refugee policymaking, the newly formed federal coalition government, between the Christian Democrats and the Social Democrats, defined in its coalition agreement in 2013 the need to reduce the immigration of refugees from the so-called countries of the Western Balkans (viz. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) while providing alternative entry routes for economic immigrants from those countries. While it was generally believed that refugees from Western Balkan countries mostly moved to Germany for economic reasons ([Bither & Ziebarth 2018](#)), the humanitarian aspect took precedence during the peak of the new refugee movement in Europe in 2015. Tragic incidents, such as deaths of refugees in locked lorries, but also the dire conditions of makeshift camps near the Greek-Macedonian border, raised concerns and put pressure on the federal administration to prevent similar situations at the German border, as interviewees reported.

With increasing numbers of refugees arriving in 2015, the federal administration faced a crisis due to logistical ill-preparedness (e.g. [Bogumil & Kuhlmann 2022](#)). The BMI dispatched teams from the Bundesamt für Bevölkerungsschutz und Katastrophenhilfe (BBK, Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance) and similar organisations to the southern border of Germany, where most refugees were arriving. In these critical weeks, careful logistical management and practical solutions were required: border management, internal security, and housing were the main concerns, according to interviewees. Additionally, the interviewees mentioned that external security was important: for example, how other countries may have manipulated and directed refugees to neighbouring countries. To get a better picture of the situation, specific information was needed: the number of people arriving at the border, their characteristics and intentions had to be understood. According to interviewees, the almost complete lack of data, along with concerns about potential humanitarian crises and security risks, led to a perceived or feared loss of control by the state.

As a result, the federal administration started to obtain data from the few available administrative, but neither reliable nor sufficient, sources (e.g. police, intelligence, and international organisations). Data from (police) registration entailed at least information about the countries of origin, age, and gender of refugees ([Amelung et al. 2024](#) and interviews). Imprecise figures, however, arose from non-harmonized arrival processes; people registered several times or not at all. For 2015, the BMI reported 1.1 million registered refugees²; later on, it corrected this number to 890,000 because of registration mistakes. However, this only had been the last incident in a series of hugely imprecise estimates with the BMI – still in early 2015 – expecting only half of this final number to enter the country ([Sarmadi 2015](#)).

The necessity of having more comprehensive and accurate information to develop sustainable solutions for refugees was recognized at the BMI already in 2015 as some governmental officials interviewed mentioned. However, due to a lack of resources they were unable to explore this further. On the other hand, other interviewees at the BMI did not perceive any specific need for information beyond the security-related data they already had. They did not see the importance of gathering information for conflict prevention, as well as for assessing wellbeing and integration prospects of the refugees, including housing, and addressing the special needs of minority groups.

In an effort to reduce the number of arrivals, the administration considered various legal options. They gathered legal, security, and foreign relations experts for discussions on how to discourage refugees within both the EU and UN frameworks, according to the interviews. This ultimately led to a deal being struck between the EU and Turkey. The rationale behind that decision mirrored that of the regulation of people arriving from the West Balkan region: to halt unregulated, spontaneous arrivals and instead provide controlled legal pathways for immigration.

2 Number of arrivals registered in residences prior to the actual asylum process. 'Refugees' is used here in a colloquial, not in a legal sense, i.e. forced migrants irrespective of whether a refugee status had already been approved.

Behind the scenes, during the peak of arrivals in September 2015, the BAMF faced its own crisis. The appointment of a new interim head who also led the Bundesagentur für Arbeit (BA, Federal Employment Agency), was significant for the relevance of scientific evidence. He initiated and supported collaborations between the research branches of both governmental organisations – BAMF and BA. He also played a key role in ensuring the broad reception of this work was fostered by reporting directly to the Chancellor, the head of the Chancellery and the Ministers of the BMI and BMAS. Moreover, the close ties of the research institutions to the federal administration ensured that findings were regularly and attentively received on the working levels.

Our analysis of different policy issues during the events in 2015 also shows how political positions influenced the way scientific information was processed selectively. Generally, policymakers preferred to select evidence that aligned with previously held beliefs and political positions associated with a particular ministry. For example, the federal government by Christian and Social Democrats included both parties in the migration policy process. Governmental officials in the federal ministries were required to adhere to the goals and priorities of the coalition. However, criticisms or research findings that challenged these goals were also considered during the administrative process. During the interviews, it was evident that governmental officials also took into account opposing evidence and internally discussed potential substantial and legal pitfalls. Nevertheless, they recognized that the ultimate decision lied in the political compromise position of the coalition agreement regardless of whether it aligned with the factual scientific evidence provided.

Moreover, interviewees identified parliamentarians as a key conduit for scientific evidence, as they often invited experts for hearings. Such expert statements regularly received significant attention in the ministries. This is true for parliamentarians and their nominated experts both from government and opposition parties. Expertise from legal scholars but also research institutions linked to ministries, such as the Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung (IAB, Institute for Employment Research) and the Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration (SVR, Expert Council on Integration and Migration) were frequently consulted³.

During the interviews, government officials expressed a desire to stay informed on political processes, while avoiding political bargaining and goalsetting, unreasonable political imagery and polemic language⁴. They also noted that they internally sided with research evidence when restrictions of mobility were discussed during the preparation of an ‘integration law’ (passed in July 2016, [Deutscher Bundestag 2016a](#)). However, functional arguments did not overthrow a coalition of security concerns, of strained capacities in municipalities and of lack of understanding of how integration works ([Bogumil et al. 2017](#), [Hillmann 2024](#)). Language acquisition and municipal capacity were central policy issues. In this discussion, states viewed refugees first of all as a burden, as they had to pay for and organise access to housing, schooling, and language classes. Most federal states wanted to control the living arrangements of refugees and to restrict their freedom of movement⁵. Ministers from both coalition parties cautioned against the emergence of ‘parallel societies,’ or ‘ghettos,’ citing spatial segregation as a presumed catalyst for conflict. This argument was echoed in the rationale behind the new law that introduced movement restrictions ([Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat, Bundesregierung 2016](#)). While relatively few studies have focused on the

3 Experts in hearings count by authors.

4 Symbols that have no evidence, no foreseeable effect, such as ‘upper capacity limit’ (number of refugees local administrations can deal with) (2015/16) or the non-cash benefits card for refugees (2023/24) ([Brücker 2024](#), [Seidl 2024](#), [FragdenStaat 2022](#)).

5 Yet the later regulation was only slowly taken up by the states; by the end of 2016, only 6 states had adopted a respective ruling or were in the process of doing so ([DStGB 2016](#)).

extent of migrant residential segregation and its effects on the population level, the prevailing opinion among researchers was that there are neither benefits for integration from restricted movement nor the emergence of a 'parallel society' (Worbs 2007; Renner 2018). Specifically, there has been an evaluation of restricting the free choice of residence for an earlier group of migrants, which was well known in the BMI, according to interviews, and later cited during an expert hearing in parliament (Haug & Sauer 2007, Brücker et al. 2016a), probably reinforcing ministerial reception. Furthermore, the BMI inquired with experts, such as researchers from the BAMF. But the negative evidence regarding the integration effects of such measures did not change the mandated task of implementing a movement restriction clause, according to the interviews. Subsequent evaluation of this clause confirmed the initial findings (Baba et al. 2023). The Commissioner for Migration, Refugees, and Integration, instead, used more moderate language, agreeing to temporary restrictions to promote integration outside of cities, contingent upon job opportunities and family obligations. Similarly, researchers conveyed the same message during an expert hearing in the German Parliament in June 2016 (Brücker et al. 2016a), presenting evidence from the evaluation mentioned above. Ultimately, the European Court of Justice ruling in 2016 was decisive: only integrative effects can justify restricting the fundamental right of free mobility, not a state's desire to distribute costs.

RESEARCH AND SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION ON REFUGEE MIGRATION

Our main question was: Which scientific evidence was available at the onset of the refugee arrival in 2015 and how did the institutional landscape of scientific research and knowledge change in response to the information needs of the federal government and its administration? In 2015, the arrival of refugees and their integration became increasingly urgent for migration research in Germany (Kleist 2017). With the arrival of an unprecedented numbers of refugees, third party funding suddenly increased, leading to a significant rise in the number of new scientific projects in Germany. In 2015, about 130 new research projects on refugees began, followed by another 175 in 2016. The topics of these research projects reflect a high level of political interest of researchers and funders in their role as members of host countries, and also mirrored prior research foci: 40% related to integration, and only a few on other aspects such as flight dynamics.

Besides this academic research, the earliest available data was produced by the BAMF. They conceptualised a first representative study on refugees in 2012, with data already collected in 2013. It focused only on refugees who were granted asylum status between 2008 and 2012. People whose application were still under review, who gained subsidiary protection or other forms of non-asylum permits to stay, were omitted. Despite the timeliness of the data, the study was published only in 2016. However, the BMI being involved in setting the research agenda of the BAMF, was informed of preliminary results earlier on according to interviewees. Additionally, BAMF collected data on asylum applicants regarding qualification (schooling, languages, professional experience). This administratively produced data did not follow scientific quality standards. Nevertheless, the results were finally published in May 2016 but had been available for internal purposes of the federal government much earlier (Rich 2016).

While the BAMF was still busy preparing these two publications, it had already begun planning the establishment of a new refugee sample within the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), Germany's largest household survey, in 2015. Its second major partner was the IAB, the research institute of the BA, supervised by the BMAS. This cooperation indirectly involved both the BMI, where the asylum and integration process begins, and the BMAS, where further labour market integration is administered. Setting up a representative survey required using the central registry of foreign nationals. Processing data from one agency to another proved to be legally impossible; therefore, a cooperation between the three organisations was the only option. Although this new survey followed up on a relatively recent migrant sample at SOEP, it still took a long time to complete. Data was finally collected mid-2016 on refugees who had arrived

between 2013 and 2016. Preliminary results were not published until the end of 2016 – almost eighteen months after the number of refugees first peaked in Germany ([Brücker et al. 2016b](#)).

Beyond projects and surveys, more significant changes also occurred in the institutional setup of migration research. Most notably, a new Deutsches Zentrum für Integrations- und Migrationsforschung (DeZIM, German Centre for Integration and Migration Research) was established in 2017. One of its founding members was the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research (BIM) at the Humboldt University. Founded in 2014, the BIM had received funding from various sources, including the IntB, and from the BA. This funding aimed to bring together university-wide research on refugees, with a specific focus on the civil society support structure ([Deutscher Bundestag 2016b](#)). The Commissioner for Migration, Refugees, and Integration has been the head of the supervisory board of BIM and was informed on its research from the inception.

From 2015 onwards, the research community became interested in building stronger ties within and actively participating in the political debate. In the Council of Migration, an exchange forum for integration and migration researchers, initial ideas were discussed on how to strengthen research and overcome its fragmentation. This initiative gained momentum with the support of the Commissioner for Migration, Refugees, and Integration and was also met with enthusiasm by other Social Democrat politicians who commissioned the setup of a new research centre, funded by the Ministry of Family Affairs ([Foroutan & Kalter 2021](#); [Deutscher Bundestag 2017](#)). The BIM was tasked with leading the establishment of the DeZIM. This centre has a dual structure of a physical institute located in Berlin and the decentralised DeZIM research community, made up mainly of university institutes. The DeZIM has put much effort into collaborating with (migrant) civic organisations, not only in terms of transfer tasks but also during the research process ([DeZIM 2022](#)).

In the following years, the BMI took further steps to strengthening migration, integration, and refugee research. The BAMF expanded, and the BMI began funding the research department of the SVR. Initially project-based, funding became institutionalised in 2021. The Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung (BiB, Federal Institute for Population Research), also funded by the BMI, expanded its research agenda with respect to international forced migration with a research project on Syrian and Eritrean refugees conducted in collaboration with the BAMF ([Sauer et al. 2021](#)).

IMPLICATIONS FOR USE OF SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR POLICYMAKING

Initially, administrations required information on border crossings, and anything else that would immediately assist in stabilizing the logistics of arrival, accommodation, and registration. To achieve this, federal administrations depended on police and intelligence as well as international sources. Additionally, the primary objective was to reduce the number of arrivals, thus easing administrative burdens, and to further integrate asylum within the European context, both legally and politically. To accomplish this, legal expertise was essential. Integration research in the social sciences has primarily focused on groups with a long-term perspective who reside in Germany, such as labour migrants or individuals who remained in the country after initially seeking asylum. Refugees have been studied to a much lesser extent, and not in large quantitative studies. However, due to new integration needs, there was an increase in research data sources that include refugees. Simultaneously, administrative forecasts and registrations produced highly inaccurate numbers, with variations in the hundreds of thousands in 2015.

The new integration law from 2016, a major policy response, made very selective use of research evidence that suggested restrictions of movement would likely be ineffective for integration. However, data on this specific issue was limited. Instead, due to concerns about security and the strain on municipalities, administrative control and distribution of costs were the main priorities influencing political decision-making.

A change in leadership within the top level of asylum management created an opportunity for a new collaboration between two key players in the integration process: the BAMF and the BA. They established a joint panel study on refugees, which, although published after the integration law reforms, became a widely referenced study in policymaking and a significant milestone of applied research.

Political cleavages influenced the way information was processed to some extent. However, policy differences between Social and Christian Democrats were minimal. The key players, the BMI and the BMAS, primarily relied on 'their' respective research institutes. The Commissioner for Integration, despite facing political obstacles, became an important facilitator of strengthening migration and integration research, a role she had already been fulfilling before 2015. Although her office had limited funding for research beyond small projects, it contributed to persuading Social Democrats in Parliament to establish a new institute under the Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend (BMFSFJ, Federal Ministry of Family Affairs). This new institute, the German Centre for Integration and Migration Research (DeZIM) was a final response to the lack of scientific evidence in policymaking in 2015.

The arrival of refugees from Ukraine in 2022

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine launched by the Russian Federation in February 2022 followed the seizure of Crimea in 2014 and years of conflict in eastern Ukraine. The war that befell the Ukrainian population forced a new wave of flight, mostly to countries of the EU. Since Ukraine already had a visa-free policy with the EU, people seeking protection could enter the Schengen Area for three months (later extended to six months) simply with a passport. Very soon, on 4 March 2022, the Justice and Home Affairs Council of the European Union agreed to activate the Temporary Protection Directive (2001/55/EC). This decision granted protection status, regardless of asylum, in moments of mass influx of people. The directive was established in the EU following the experiences of the Yugoslav wars but had never been used before. Because of this handling, the flight had no immediate impact on border crossing management or the asylum system of European member states. Among other things, the directive offered refugees the opportunity to find private accommodation instead of refugee accommodation, which was obligatory for asylum seekers. In the next section, we outline the priorities that shaped the refugee policy; following this, we examine the matching or mismatch of research evidence with information needs, and then discuss the implications of using scientific evidence for policymaking.

REACTIONS OF POLICYMAKERS

Compared to the situation in 2015, the political setup of the government has shifted in the meantime. In December 2021, only weeks before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a new federal government was established based on a coalition of Social Democrats, Greens, and Liberals. All migration and integration actors, the Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI) and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs (BMAS), as well as the Integration Commissioner's Office (IntB), were now headed by Social Democrats. Additionally, the legal prerequisites of protection had changed significantly, affecting both the opportunities for refugees and the demand for state action and its information needs. Now, in the overall integration strategy of refugees and other immigrants, more barriers were removed to allow for better integration into the labour market, and also for political participation.

When refugees from Ukraine arrived in Germany from February 2022 onwards, the governmental orientation towards integration policies prevailed. While policies at first aimed at a more long-term integration, putting language first, demands for stronger labour market participation increased during a surge of anti-Ukrainian resentments after some initial time of arrival. Earlier points of discussion, such as restrictions on movement, were no longer contentious. The special status of Ukrainians allowed this refugee group to largely decide for themselves where to live. Since most Ukrainians found private accommodation,

this also influenced financial compensation negotiations between municipalities and the federal level, and the federal level's policy of facilitating private accommodation ([BAMF 2024](#)). Municipalities that had reorganised their capacities in the years after 2016, soon voiced concerns about missing resources ([Kühn 2023](#)). Additionally, local administrations appeared to be facing significant constraints in providing services such as childcare and language classes, due to a tightening labour and housing market.

The integration strategy, which initially prioritised language acquisition, then increasingly shifted focus on the labour market, while still overlooking some specific research findings regarding the experiences of Ukrainian refugees. Their specific qualification profile, their family situation, nor internal European mobility were considered in governmental policies. However, in the overall political strategy, the German government has been participating in the international 'Skills Alliance for Ukraine' since the summer of 2024. This initiative connects investment in Ukraine with efforts to qualify Ukrainian refugees abroad. As an EU candidate state, Ukraine may eventually enjoy the benefit from freedom of movement within the EU. According to some, new regulations following up on the protection directive must consider this possibility ([Schneider 2024](#)). However, this is likely to require significant investments in Ukraine, as a way to address the ongoing issue of brain drain that has persisted for decades ([Odarchenko 2024](#)).

RESEARCH AND SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION AS RESOURCE FOR POLICYMAKING

Building upon the experiences in 2015, the arrival of Ukrainian refugees resulted in a much faster response from researchers to undertake new scientific studies. Using already existing research infrastructures, the IAB-BAMF-SOEP consortium, in close collaboration with the Federal Institute of Population Research (BiB) and the German Family Demography Panel Study (FReDA) quickly established a new panel survey on Ukrainian refugees. This consortium began providing policy advice to their respective governmental departments already from March 2022 onwards, which included first results on the determinants of spatial patterns of arriving Ukrainian refugees. In internal meetings with the administration, the first results of the survey were presented in November 2022 and remained very much in demand with regularly updated results following each survey wave every six months ([Brücker et al. 2022](#); [Brücker et al. 2023](#)). Other significant players, particularly DeZIM and DJI, also provided policy advice focusing in particular on the needs of specific subgroups of Ukrainian refugees (e.g. [Boll et al. 2023](#)).

On the one hand, current research has sought to catch up with previous studies on Ukrainian humanitarian and labour migration, comparing European developments. Specifically, the post-Soviet history of emigration to neighbouring countries, the forced migration following the annexation of Crimea and the onset of the Donbas war 2014, and the implementation of visa-free entry to the EU in 2017 are pertinent factors in earlier migration patterns ([Mikheieva & Kuznetsova 2023](#)). On the other hand, researchers focused on the identification of the specific characteristics of the new group of refugees. They focused on the specific integration needs of Ukrainian refugees who arrived with high qualifications but also care needs for their young children. Particularly in the beginning, research and policymaking followed an integration paradigm contributing to improved long-term living prospects in destination countries ([Bundesinstitut für Bevölkerungsforschung 2023](#)). The research findings highlighted a strong desire of refugees to return to Ukraine or to engage in circular migration between home and host countries. These findings highlighted the need for a tailored integration approach. Rapid recognition of Ukrainian qualifications, access to public childcare, and supporting a 'dual intent' strategy facilitating both stay and return, were recommended by researchers ([Kohlenberger et al. 2022](#), [Ette et al. 2023](#), [Sachverständigenrat für Integration und Migration 2024b](#), [Jauhiainen 2024](#)).

IMPLICATIONS FOR USE OF SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE FOR POLICYMAKING

In contrast to 2015, the research landscape in 2022 was better developed. Both policymaking and research were focused on supporting the quick integration of refugees, or indicators related to that goal. Researchers relied on a well-established data infrastructure and quickly built up specific new data sources and longitudinal surveys. While it had taken more than a year for the results of the first refugee sample to be available in 2016 (nearly three years in the case of the first BAMF study), this process happened much more quickly now. Figures on living situations, language course participation and employment were used to inform state action. The BMI, BMAS as well as the IntB were all under one party's control (Social Democrats). There was no major disagreement on refugee policy within the coalition.

On the research side, federal research institutes like the IAB and the BiB gained attention particular from their responsible government department. Additionally, the recently established DeZIM proved to be an additional channel of academic research from universities into policymaking, although it remained somewhat distant from the major integration ministries. Smaller units, such as the nups-network, established as a part of the Metropolis-process in 2022 and funded by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, started to focus on topics linked to the recruitment of skilled labour in a social policy perspective. While research overall effectively met the needs of policymakers, the integration paradigm needs (and has started) to be complemented with more research on circular migration of Ukrainian refugees taking into account their lower settlement intentions compared to refugees from other destination countries who arrived earlier in Germany.

Conclusion

Our analysis of two major periods of Germany's migration and integration policymaking on refugee protection over the past decade provides empirical evidence on three key aspects of effective science communication.

First, evidence was selected based on the political convictions of policymakers. The example from 2015 demonstrated that evidence was only utilized to bolster the creation of legislation or programs if it aligned with political ideas of the governing parties. However, evidence that was publicly presented in parliament or reported by governmental research institutes or research funded by governmental departments was still reviewed and analysed in the ministries, even if it contradicted current political positions. The interviewed governmental officials identified with the notion of impartiality and described themselves as knowledgeable experts tasked with finding practical solutions to political problems. Providing accurate statistics when discussing an issue at hand has been crucial for crafting legitimate policies. Research evidence competed with intelligence and police sources, as well as real-time monitoring. Whereas in 2015 administrative data was inaccurate or incomplete and scientific research was scarce, in the following years the focus has shifted from simply getting the numbers right to making sense of a vast amount of information and statistics including numerous scientific studies.

Second, evidence was selected based on professional experience and institutional mindset. Within the Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI), a legalistic approach combined with a focus on security has been predominant and shaped information needs. Previously existing restrictions of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) as well as the Federal Employment Agency (BA) along with their associated research units were overcome by a temporary joint head of both agencies following the developments in 2015. This led to the initiation of a fruitful and significant scientific study that continues to this day. Additionally, the Federal Government Commissioner for Migration, Refugees, and Integration (IntB) served as an advocate for migrant groups and for the normalization of cultural diversity. In this capacity, they have also promoted research as a discursive policy tool. This new 'tool' has transitioned to a

new player, the Ministry of Family Affairs (BMFSFJ). In the case of Ukrainians, the integration paradigm has influenced information requirements.

Third, scientific evidence had to be practically applicable. The empirical analyses showed that the necessary political trade-offs regarding migration and integration goals are often very specific. Ministries require timely and concise information regarding policy problems, including, for example, information about specific needs of refugees or the support needed at the municipal level. However, once the details of a policy are finalized, scientific evidence becomes less important, even if officials understand the shortcomings of specific policy decisions. In 2015, there was limited research on refugees and whatever information was available was utilized for policy-making purposes. Comprehensive scientific studies on the new refugee groups were only published after new integration policies were introduced. In contrast, by 2022, there was a well-developed scientific landscape and representative empirical studies were quickly put in place providing governmental departments with more authoritative results.

Focusing on the information needs of the government comes with caveats. It implies a false certainty of scientific evidence for policies because administrations do not ask for what evidence is missing; and it is challenging for researchers to question prevailing policy assumptions in governmental departments and in the political sphere. To improve the communication of science towards policymaking, governmental departments ought to use their federal research institutes more strategically to utilise their scientific evidence for policymaking. Additionally, governmental administrations could consider establishing scientific advisors or small research units responsible for continuously providing up-to-date systematic reviews, for out-of-the-box thinking, and for coordinating scientific advice within and between governmental departments.

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