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Germany ends fast-track citizenship, halts refugee family reunions

Germany ends fast-track citizenship after 3 years and halts family reunions for refugees with partial protection under new immigration rules approved on May 28

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Despite the stricter immigration rules, German officials continue to say the country needs more foreign workers.

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Germany's cabinet, led by Chancellor Friedrich Merz, approved a series of immigration reforms on May 28, tightening entry and settlement rules at a time of growing public concern over migration.

A key change is the temporary suspension of family reunification rights for people with subsidiary protection—refugees who are not granted full asylum status, such as many Syrians. For the next two years, they will not be allowed to bring their spouses or children to join them in Germany.

Interior Minister Alexander Dobrindt said the decision was necessary. "Our urban systems have reached their breaking point," he said. "We cannot manage the volume

without creating severe challenges for public services.”

Merz’s coalition government came to power in February after an election dominated by debate over migration and border control.

No more early citizenship route

The reforms also put an end to the fast-track route to German citizenship, which had allowed well-integrated migrants to apply after just three years of residency.

Under the new rules, all applicants must now live in Germany for at least five years before applying for citizenship. However, an exception remains for foreigners married to German citizens—they can still apply after three years, as long as the marriage has lasted at least two years.

Visa appeal process overhauled

From July 1, Germany will no longer accept informal visa appeal letters. The global remonstrations process—where rejected applicants could write to the consulate for a review—will be scrapped.

Any challenge to a visa refusal must now go through formal legal channels.

“In the past, on a rejected German Schengen visa application, a person could provide a remonstrations letter to the consulate or embassy of Germany that rejected it,” Mamta Shekhawat, founder of study abroad platform Gradding.com explained to Business Standard. “This was an informal appeal of the application where the applicant could provide additional information or clarify any misunderstanding without going through the formalities of legal procedures. It was an affordable and convenient means of reviewing potential mistakes or oversights in the original application.”

This change could affect Indian students and professionals, who have increasingly turned to Germany as an alternative to countries like Canada, the US and the UK, where visa routes have become more restrictive.

What the changes mean for Indians

Most Indians in Germany—especially students and skilled professionals—are not on subsidiary protection status and so will not be affected by the family reunification suspension.

But the end of the fast-track citizenship path may delay long-term plans for some migrants.

Germany has been actively encouraging skilled migration from India to address domestic labour shortages. Indians remain the second-largest Asian-origin group in Germany, after Afghans, with 273,000 people of Indian origin living in the country.

In October 2024, the German government said it would increase professional visa approvals by over 10 per cent in 2025. On November 17, it confirmed it would issue 200,000 such visas—90,000 of them for Indian workers, a sharp rise from the earlier cap of 20,000.

Skilled workers still in demand

Despite the stricter immigration rules, German officials continue to say the country needs more foreign workers.

Speaking in New Delhi in April, German Ambassador to India Dr Philipp Ackermann said, “Our government has very clearly identified a need for about 500,000 skilled workers per year across all sectors—not just the top levels but also at the apprenticeship level. We need bakers, butchers, plumbers—people across the skills spectrum.”

He also referred to Germany’s new “Opportunity Card”, which lets eligible migrants apply for a visa without a job offer if they meet the points-based criteria. “Currently, we issue about 20,000 to 25,000 skilled worker visas a year. That’s not enough. We need more—but also the right kind of migration, with skilled, motivated candidates,” said Ackermann.

What remains unchanged

- < The 5-year residency requirement for citizenship still applies.
- < All applicants must demonstrate at least B1-level German language proficiency.
- < Dual citizenship continues to be permitted.

Germany’s reforms may introduce additional hurdles, but the door remains open for those with the qualifications and skills the country needs.

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