Townhall

More and More Germans Are Leaving Their Country

By **Dr. Rainer Zitelmann** | September 07, 2026 12:01 AM

Twenty-one percent of young Germans between the ages of 14 and 29 are making concrete plans to leave Germany. Forty-one percent can at least imagine doing so. Even among the population as a whole, one in five is considering emigrating. Of course, not everyone who says they are thinking about emigrating actually leaves. But many do – and their numbers are growing.

In 2024, 269,986 Germans left the country. For years, the figure has remained steady at just over a quarter of a million per year. This is not a new phenomenon: Among German citizens, the net migration balance has been negative for more than two decades. In other words, more Germans consistently leave the country than German returnees come back. In 2024, the net loss was 81,000; last year, it was 97,000.

The troubling part is that those who leave are predominantly highly qualified: 75 percent have a university degree. “It is,” Alexander Steffen writes in his recently published book “Goodbye Deutschland”, “the qualified, those with language skills, those with options, those who are needed elsewhere and are not dependent on

Germany." And it is not just those who actually emigrate, but also those who have already mentally checked out of the country. "When it is precisely these people who are mentally quitting, that is not a character flaw on their part. It is the price a country pays for believing for too long that it can milk achievement, lecture people about freedom, and regard success with suspicion without ever having to pay the bill."

Steffen does not advocate for emigration. He explicitly writes that he wants to stay because he loves his country. But he warns of the consequences when more and more people with little or no qualifications enter the country while more and more highly qualified people leave. Steffen supports immigration. But qualified immigration.

"Germany," Steffen writes, "does not have a problem with the quantity of migration; it has a problem with quality. Too often, it keeps and financially supports people who burden its system, while losing or driving away people who would make the country stronger."

Recommended
It Looks Like We've Made a Big Step in Combating Alzheimer's Amy Curtis American Heroes of 9/11: Todd Beamer and the Passengers of Flight 93 Amy Curtis

Steffen has spoken with people – especially young people – who have emigrated or are seriously considering doing so. For him, their motives are also an indicator of what is going wrong in our country. In one sentence: "Elsewhere, success is an invitation; here, it is grounds for suspicion." Indeed, Germans are particularly envious of successful and wealthy people. This is also shown by a survey of 13 countries – not cited in his book – which demonstrates that social envy in Germany is higher than in almost any other country. According to the Ipsos MORI survey, it was higher only in France. In Poland, for example, a very dynamic and rapidly growing country, envy is much lower.

What motivates the young people the author spoke with? The fundamental complaint is that the state demands a great deal from them and takes a great deal away from them, while providing less and less in return. Florian is 33, comes from Hamburg, and worked in his family's business. He is now planning to move to Doha. "He comes from the chemical and construction industries, a world in which regulations, labeling requirements, liability rules, and supply chains determine the working day. When he said that he was treated like a criminal here, he did not sound angry, but exhausted." The final straw was a hefty fine because one out of 5,000 products had been incorrectly labeled due to a completely irrelevant printing error. "A state that punishes a minor mistake more harshly than it ever rewards success has got its incentives backwards."

Tobias came to Switzerland for an internship and stayed. For working five additional hours a week, he earns twice the net salary and gets an apartment on top of that. But for him and the other people Steffen interviewed, it is not primarily about such figures. It is about a feeling: Working there is simply more enjoyable, he says, because he experiences appreciation not only from his employer but throughout society. Germany, he adds, is not a country he would associate with that word.

Jan is 38, comes from Bavaria, and now lives in Bulgaria, where the tax burden is ten percent. But for him and many others, the following applies: “In the end, they did not flee high taxes, but the deep-seated mistrust that almost automatically comes into play in Germany whenever someone has the audacity to build something of their own. The tax bill was merely the tangible manifestation of a sense of alienation that had actually been there for a long time.”

This reminds me of Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s, when not only did the tax burden become unbearable, but envy of entrepreneurs and the wealthy became widespread. The German writer Hans Magnus Enzensberger wrote about Sweden at the time: “In such a society, the rich, it seems, have little to laugh about. If only it were the taxes! As respectable citizens, they are willing to pay them on time, albeit reluctantly. What hurts them much more is the fact that no one has any sympathy for their plight.” Sweden, Enzensberger wrote, had developed into a country in which the rich felt “superfluous, disrespected, and excluded.”

Steffen’s conversations with the self-employed and small business owners can be summed up as follows: “They did not fail because a form was too long, but because they felt that the state treated them as adversaries rather than as the people who help pay for the whole system.” At some point, people stop fighting that feeling and start looking for alternatives.

A successful tennis player who now lives in the United States says: “In the U.S., I experienced for the first time that success is not something to be embarrassed about. In Germany, people are quick to ask whether you might be wanting too much. In America, they are more likely to ask how big you want to make it.”

I can confirm what Steffen writes from my own experience. A friend of mine, a very well-integrated and highly qualified German of Turkish descent, moved to Switzerland a week ago. The reason: He wants to start a company and cannot imagine doing so in Germany. Another friend of mine, an extremely successful – and wealthy – investor, has been living in Abu Dhabi for several years. “I didn’t leave because of the taxes,” he says. “I left because of the envy.”

Source: https://townhall.com/columnists/rainerzitelmann/2026/09/07/more-and-more-germans-are-leaving-their-country-n2682547