From Managed Permanence to Managed Mobility

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Introduction

This distinction is analytically central. Temporary labour migration, where mobility is planned and economically motivated, constitutes the primary context in which circular patterns naturally emerge. Syrian refugees arrived for protection, not economic opportunity, and their mobility decisions are shaped by considerations of security and long-term stability rather than labour market incentives. At a conceptual level, circular migration reflects a policy logic primarily oriented toward destination-country interests, allow-

ing continued access to migrant labour while limiting the fiscal, political, and demographic implications of permanent settlement.

While framed as voluntary and mutually beneficial, the model follows the logic of earlier guest worker programmes, in which economic contribution was decoupled from social membership, an asymmetry that its current framing obscures rather than resolves. For origin countries, it promises remittances and skills transfer. For migrants, the calculus is more ambiguous. Circular mobility introduces legal precarity, interrupted integration, and the risk of permanent liminality, and is most coercive for those who migrated for protection and whose ability to return depends on conditions beyond their control.

2. Policy Recalibration: From Integration to Managed Mobility

The current recalibration marks a shift in the logic of Germany's post-2015 framework of managed permanence. Protection is now increasingly treated as conditional and open to revision as conditions in the country of origin change. This reframing introduces a temporal dimension that refugee law was not designed to accommodate, as protection is typically assessed at a fixed point in time and grounded in the principle of non-refoulement. The question is no longer only whether an individual requires protection upon arrival, but whether that need persists and who bears the burden of proving it.

Circular migration was formally introduced at the European level in 2006 as part of a broader effort to facilitate temporary and repeated mobility, explicitly oriented toward destination-country interests. Its re-emergence is analytically significant because it is being applied to humanitarian migrants with established legal status and deep social ties, a population for whom it was never designed. The 2006 framework envisaged circular migration primarily for low- and medium-skilled labour migrants moving under bilateral agreements. Its extension to Syrian refugees represents a categorical shift in the model's intended scope: where the original framework assumed migrants whose status was temporary and whose ties to the destination country were shallow, the current application concerns a population with years of embedded residence, accumulated legal rights, and dependent family members, a mismatch that exposes the model's foundational assumptions to strain.

3. Electoral Pressure

The domestic political logic driving this recalibration is shaped in part by pressures to demonstrate visible migration control. Merz's suggestion that up to 80% of Syrians in Germany could return within three years is best understood in this context, less as a policy forecast than as an articulation of political ambition through quantifiable return targets.

The risks of this strategy are substantial. By anchoring its credibility to quantitative return targets, the government commits itself to outcomes it cannot reliably produce. Syrians now form the largest group of newly naturalised citizens in Germany, and employment rates have exceeded initial projections, making the population the government is seeking to mobilise for return one of the most legally and socially settled in the country. The gap between political expectation and observable outcome is therefore likely to be significant. If return figures fall far short of stated targets, as seems probable, the AfD can frame the shortfall not as evidence of a structurally flawed model but as evidence that mainstream parties lack the will or competence to implement it. The result is a self-reinforcing dynamic in which each unmet target may shift the boundaries of mainstream debate further toward coercive approaches.

This mismatch between political timescales and migration realities is structural rather than contingent. Labour market integration deepens over time, and the social and economic ties that make return less likely strengthen with each year of residence. Conditions in Syria remain volatile and highly localised, meaning that individual return decisions depend on factors such as security, infrastructure, and or family circumstances, which lie beyond German policy control. Circular migration, whose logic depends on voluntary movement underpinned by stability in both origin and destination, cannot be accelerated by political will alone.

4. Labour Market Contradictions

Circular migration's economic rationale rests on the assumption that skills acquired in Germany can be transferred to Syria's reconstruction while Germany retains flexible access to migrant labour. The available evidence complicates both sides of this claim. Labour market integration among Syrian refugees is gradual and structurally uneven: seven years after arrival, the employment rate reaches approximately 61%, with a significant gender gap of 73% for men and 29% for women. Barriers, including language limitations, difficulties in recognising foreign qualifications, and mismatches between education systems, mean that many refugees experience de-skilling, which limits both their productivity in Germany and the transferability of the skills they do acquire.

At the same time, Syrian workers have become concentrated in sectors with sustained structural demand. Around 62% work in system-relevant occupations, compared to 48% of native German workers, with significant concentrations in healthcare, logistics, and social services. The longer refugees remain embedded in these sectors, the more disruptive their departure becomes, for the individuals concerned, for employers, and for the functioning of services that have come to depend on them. Crucially, the sectors in which Syrians are most employed in Germany do not map onto Syria's reconstruction needs, and Syria's post-conflict economic structures

remain too limited and fragmented to absorb returning workers at scale. The model's economic rationale therefore, rests on an assumed complementarity between two labour markets that does not exist in practice.

Further complicating the model's assumptions, research indicates that it is social integration, not economic integration, that most strongly shapes refugees' intention to remain in Germany. Labour market ties matter, but the deeper anchors of settlement are social: language acquisition, family formation, and community networks that are neither transferable nor reversible.

This distinction has significant policy implications that the circular migration model fails to account for. A refugee who has spent years building proficiency in German, whose children are enrolled in local schools, who has established a professional network, and who is embedded in community and associational life is not only calculating a labour market trade-off when deciding whether to remain. The social infrastructure of settlement is accumulated incrementally and largely invisible to policy, but it is precisely this infrastructure that makes return increasingly unlikely the longer residence continues. Policy instruments designed around economic incentives are therefore operating on the wrong variable, and the gap between the model's behavioural assumptions and the actual drivers of settlement decisions is likely to grow wider over time.

5. Legal and Institutional Constraints

Circular migration at scale faces structural legal constraints that existing frameworks are not built to accommodate. Asylum systems, both under German law and the broader EU architecture, operate on a binary logic: either an individual requires protection and is granted status accordingly, or they do not and are subject to return. Cyclical mobility, which presupposes repeated and legitimate movement between host and origin country, fits neither category.

The most direct constraint concerns the relationship between departure and legal status. Leaving Germany can trigger a reassessment of protection status and interrupt the accumulation of residence entitlements, meaning that refugees seeking permanent residence or naturalisation risk jeopardising their eligibility through extended periods abroad. The legal architecture thus creates a structural disincentive to the very behaviour the model seeks to encourage. At the EU level, no dedicated instrument exists for circular migration among humanitarian migrants. Existing frameworks, such as the EU Blue Card, apply to economic migrants and do not extend to those with protection status. Developing an appropriate pathway would require either substantial reform of existing status categories or an entirely new legal instrument, neither of which is currently under active development. A large-scale reassessment of protection status would also place significant additional strain on courts and administrative bodies that are already

overstretched, potentially delaying the very outcomes the policy seeks to accelerate.

This gap is not simply a technical omission. It reflects the fact that the EU's migration architecture was not designed to accommodate the hybrid status that circular migration presupposes.

Conclusion

Circular migration has emerged as the primary conceptual vehicle for Germany's shift away from managed permanence, a model whose appeal lies in its apparent capacity to reconcile political, economic, and humanitarian objectives simultaneously. The analysis here suggests that reconciliation is more apparent than real. Legal frameworks constrain repeated movement, labour market embeddedness undermines the assumption of reversibility, and the absence of dedicated institutional infrastructure leaves the model without viable foundations at scale. Politically, the adoption of quantitative return targets introduces a credibility risk the AfD is structurally well-positioned to exploit, potentially driving policy toward more coercive approaches regardless of the government's stated intentions.

Circular migration's significance lies less in what it will deliver than in what it reveals, namely that German migration governance is undergoing a fundamental reconfiguration in which the assumptions of permanence and integration that shaped policy for a decade are being replaced by a more conditional and contested framework, one whose internal contradictions remain unresolved. Return will occur at scale only when it is genuinely voluntary, which requires that refugees retain the legal security to leave without forfeiting the right to come back, a condition the current framework does not meet.