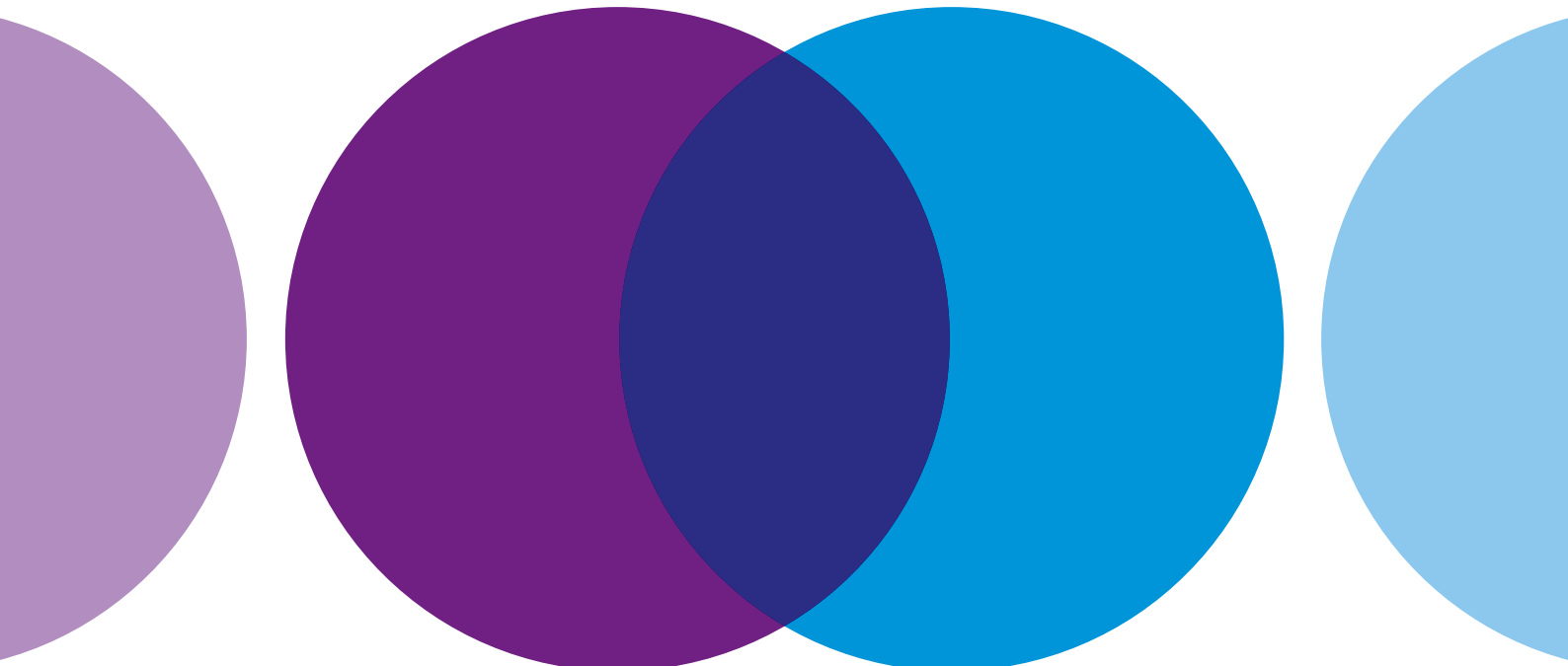# Two worlds? Integration policy in urban and rural areas

Summary

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Central findings and recommendations

The study Zwei Welten? Integrationspolitik in Stadt und Land [Two worlds? Integration policy in urban and rural areas], published in 2020, investigates the municipal integration policy of 92 municipalities selected according to defined criteria in twelve German federal states (23 independent cities, 24 districts and 45 municipalities belonging to a certain district). The focus of the study is on the questions: what was the strategic response of municipalities to the increased migration in the years 2015/16 and how sustainable are the established structures? Furthermore, the study also examines the relationships between the different municipalities as well as between the municipalities and other political levels. To answer these questions, 182 detailed interviews were conducted with employees in public administration and civil society actors between July 2018 and May 2019. These interviews were complemented by an extensive collection of documents (organisational charts, integration concepts). The central findings and recommendations are as follows:

1 **The migration and refugee situation in 2015/16 was a catalyst for municipal integration policy**

While municipalities have been viewed as pioneers in integration governance for some time now, this was mostly true for large cities. The number of arrivals seen in 2015/16 acted as a catalyst for municipalities to ensure that they are better and more strategically prepared for accepting migrants and for the diversity migration brings with it. The need to receive these refugees brought to light various contradictions in the system which had been ignored for years and which were now addressed. 68 per cent of municipalities under study exhibited forms of organisational and institutional change (chapter 3.2). It were only rather smaller municipalities belonging to a district who did not make any changes. In these cases – in addition to the lack of resources –, there is an impression that the arriving migrants wished to quickly take leave of these smaller communities in favour of larger cities (or that they had already left). Some of the organisational changes in the

municipalities only really started taking effect after the rush to enable reception and accommodations dissipated. At the centre of the debate was, and still is, the tense relationship between administrative-regulatory and socially responsible action, which is rather typical of the policy area. In many municipalities these debates and changes are, in fact, still ongoing. They are vital for a coherent and sustainable local integration policy and must be allowed to continue – and must also not be left by the wayside in the wake of the interruption caused by COVID-19.

2 **Municipal integration management oscillates between informal action and centralised one-stop shops**

The study identified seven types of municipal integration management (chapter 3.1). These range from informal integration management by volunteers or even the mayor themself to well-polished mainstreaming approaches or centralised, professional units, e.g. a migration office. There is no one "right" solution here, but many possible, sensible approaches, which in reality manifest as mixed forms of ideal types. From the viewpoint of sustainability of the structures, formalised types appear to have an advantage. All the same, even the most formalised form, the migration office, can come under increased pressure at times of ebbing migration numbers and budgetary constraints. A possible way to counteract this would be to create flexible structures that would allow to react to changing needs, and which have already been implemented in some municipalities.

3 **The sustainability of municipal integration policy is at stake**

While some municipalities have long held a special place at the budgetary table for integration policy-related tasks, others are still very much dependent on project-related funding or subsidies from the federal or state government (chapter 3.3).

This also concerns the centralised coordination of integration activities. Even in places where integration activities are funded with municipal resources, the actors involved are under a lot of pressure to justify their actions. These are, after all, mostly tasks that the municipalities are taking upon themselves on a voluntary basis. Should the Covid crisis put an even greater strain on the municipal budgets, and other funding programmes were to expire, this pressure will only increase. If these circumstances were to coincide with a period of reduced migration numbers, it would be all the more difficult to bring about a political decision for a permanent financing of these laboriously created structures. Municipalities will therefore do well to consider how to secure the continued existence of their structures, also planning for several different scenarios. For their part, the state governments, and indirectly also the federal government, need to consider whether integration (in whatever form) should be made an obligatory task of the municipalities. Such an anchoring of the integration task in the legal obligations of a municipality would greatly reduce the permanent pressure to justify these actions and would ensure stability.

4 Diffusion of responsibilities among the political levels prevents policy coherence

The formal responsibilities for migration and integration policy are spread across all federal governance levels. The resulting confusion is not restricted only to the citizens, even public administration employees, or mayors, are not always certain which responsibility falls onto them. When in doubt, they often prefer to remain passive, or "pass the buck", so to speak, to another level of governance. As municipalities, and especially those that are part of a certain district administration, cannot in reality enact a coherent policy on their own, they often reject any claim to steering such policy decisions. On the other end of this spectrum, some municipalities go so far as to take on even tasks that are not formally theirs. For example, many interviewees named enabling German language acquisition

as the most important area of action in municipal integration policy (chapter 5.2). However, this task is, in fact, the purview of entirely different actors: the state government for German courses in schools and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees for integration courses. The federal and the state governments need to address this lack of clarity to create and promote coherence in local integration policy. A strong decentralisation of integration policy (or a centralisation at the municipal level) needs not necessarily lead to chaos at the federal level. Clear legal guidelines and unambiguous distribution of competences can help ensure that responsible decisions can and must be made.

5 District administrations and municipalities belonging to them do work well together, but local knowledge management can be improved

The cooperation between district administrations and the municipalities belonging to them were rated as intensive and predominantly positive (chapter 4.1). The focus here was on the support for the municipalities by the district administration. Policy field-related exchange between the districts and municipalities was also said to mostly be taking place. Although, this exchange seems to be strongly oriented towards specific needs. District administrations and municipal authorities only interact with one another when there is an acute need to clarify some specific question on migration policy. At times of reduced migration movements, district administrations no longer feel it is their responsibility to maintain those structures that exist at the municipal level. It would therefore be beneficial for district administrations to work towards establishing a locally adapted knowledge management system for those municipalities working under them.

6 Inter-municipal cooperation is important and must be intensified

The municipalities studied showed that they do indeed acknowledge the value of inter-municipal cooperation. How this looks in practice, however, varied greatly (chapter 4.2). Municipalities within a single district did usually maintain an exchange with one another. Beyond district boundaries, however, things looked very different. One third of the municipalities stated in the interviews to be maintaining an exchange and cooperation relationship with other municipalities outside their own district, mainly independent cities and district administrations. Only one municipality belonging to a district sought contacts outside its own district. It was remarkable that an exchange between district administrations and their neighbouring independent cities was rather rare, even in situations where migrants often commute back and forth between them in their everyday lives. In this regard, both the municipalities themselves as well as municipal umbrella associations and the federal states are called upon to actively seek out opportunities to intensify cooperation between them. Municipal platforms for exchange should also be strengthened, possibly also with digital formats.

7 Municipal authorities are trying to have an impact on integration policy at the state and federal levels

More than four fifths (85.9 per cent) of the municipalities under study stated that they wish to make their own contribution to integration policy at their respective states (chapter 4.3). More than half (55.3 per cent) went so far as to express a desire to have an impact on federal integration policy. This corresponds with a growing confidence to speak up on integration policy matters, especially among independent cities and district administrations. The paths municipalities choose to achieve this goal are very different. 56.5 per cent of the municipalities deem the more or less daily contact with employees of state and (more rarely) federal agencies to be particularly promising. In this manner they attempt to bring matters directly to that level and to skew decisions in their favour.

About one quarter of interviewees saw municipal umbrella associations, and especially their local and regional sub-divisions, as playing a pivotal role in lobbying or advocating for their interests. This is especially the case if key municipal actors also serve as functionaries in these associations, and can therefore more easily make the municipality's position the association's position.

8 Integration at the municipal level is also planned as an inclusive function

While the term "integration" is widely used, it is also controversial in equal measure. Many critics see the term to refer to a unilateral "adaptation" of migrants. Semantically, and as it was used in early sociology, "integration" simply refers to the creation of social cohesion. The inflammatory question in the current discourse is who in a pluralistic society needs to change in order to reach this cohesion. In fact, many integration measures still do see migrants as those required to make changes. They are also traditionally the addressees of municipal integration measures. Despite this phenomenon, the study has found a more inclusive approach to municipal integration policy in at least 31 municipalities (33.7 per cent). These municipalities take a whole-of-society approach in their planning of integration measures, which are targeted at all residents of the municipality (chapter 5.1). This does not only apply to large cities; eleven municipalities belonging to a district also do this. Even though the promise to be inclusive is rarely kept in practice, a strong awareness of inclusive approaches can indeed be observed among many actors responsible for integration policy. Their task is to now translate this theoretical awareness into action.

9 A renaissance for integration concepts

The integration concept forms the strategic outline of a municipality's integration policy. The first heyday of municipal integration concepts was in the mid-2000s. A number of local authorities, mostly larger cities and a few district administrations, developed papers of which some were still in effect until 2015/16, or still are even today. The data

collected in our study shows that the migration situation in 2015/16 engendered a sort of renaissance of integration concepts. Of the 92 municipalities under study, around one third was working with integration concepts (chapter 5.3). Just under one half of which started working with a concept for the first time after 2015/16. In most cases, this concept was their already existing practice given written form. It is worth noting, however, that integration concepts are to be found almost exclusively at the level of independent cities and district administrations. Our study identified only two municipalities belonging to a district that have an integration concept. Unlike in the first wave of integration concepts, there is less of an attempt now to implement an elaborate, time-consuming "integration monitoring" using aggregated data in the concepts. The current phase of developing new and revising old concepts does not seem to have reached its end just yet. From experiences gained with previous concepts, the recommendation can be made to municipalities starting out in this field now to formulate the papers fundamentally so that they could remain in effect for the long term, and on the other hand, they should define the goals and responsibilities clearly to ensure that the concept can be used to guide action. An integration concept should also be created locally in a participatory process. In practice there are also concepts that are created as part of a thesis for a university degree programme. It is recommended to refrain from this approach in order to ensure the involvement of as many actors as possible (and thus their ownership).

10 Rural communities also have experience managing migration – but fewer well-established structures

When discussing differences in integration policy between urban and rural areas, it is not uncommon to encounter the misinformed assertion that rural communities have little experience with migration and are therefore less equipped to handle migration and the diversity it brings. There is nothing in our data to support such an assertion born of a mere stereotype. 87 of 92 municipalities participating in the study confirmed that they do have experience with migration (chapter 6.2). When asked whether this experience came in helpful in 2015/16, their answers differed widely. More important

than the felt municipal experience with migration is the establishment of concrete structures for managing migration and diversity. Interviewees reported observing clear differences between rural and urban areas in this regard (chapter 6.1). Instead of lamenting a believed lack of experience of rural regions in managing migration, it would be more accurate to talk of insufficiently developed structures.

11 City and countryside? Municipal integration policy takes place in more than two worlds

The study shows that the pairs of supposed antitheses "city" and "countryside", or "urban" and "rural" are insufficient for explaining variance in municipal integration policy. Even though mobility, personal contacts and the presence of migrant communities were consistently named in the interviews as differences between urban and rural contexts (chapter 6.1), there appear to be other factors that are more decisive for the design of municipal integration policy. In addition to the central question of whether it is an independent city or a municipality belonging to a district, the personal engagement of key figures and the local narratives, or framing, also play an important role. Of secondary importance for the orientation of local integration policy are the socio-economic situation and the party-political majorities. This results in more than just "two worlds" of municipal integration policy: Cities are not necessarily better equipped to deal with migration, and rural regions are not automatically unprofessional and underdeveloped in regards to integration policy. Local narratives and a few key figures can make a difference here.
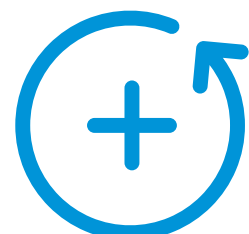
Imprint

Please note that this document is a summary of the study Schammann/Bendel/Müller/Ziegler/Wittchen (2020): "Zwei Welten? Integrationspolitik in Stadt und Land", available in German at https://www.bosch-stiftung.de/de/ publikation/zwei-welten-integrationspolitik-stadt-und-land and published by the Robert Bosch Stiftung GmbH. This English translation only comprises some parts of the full version. For more information on the underlying research project, on the methodology and a full bibliography, please consult the full version (only available in German via the above-mentioned link).

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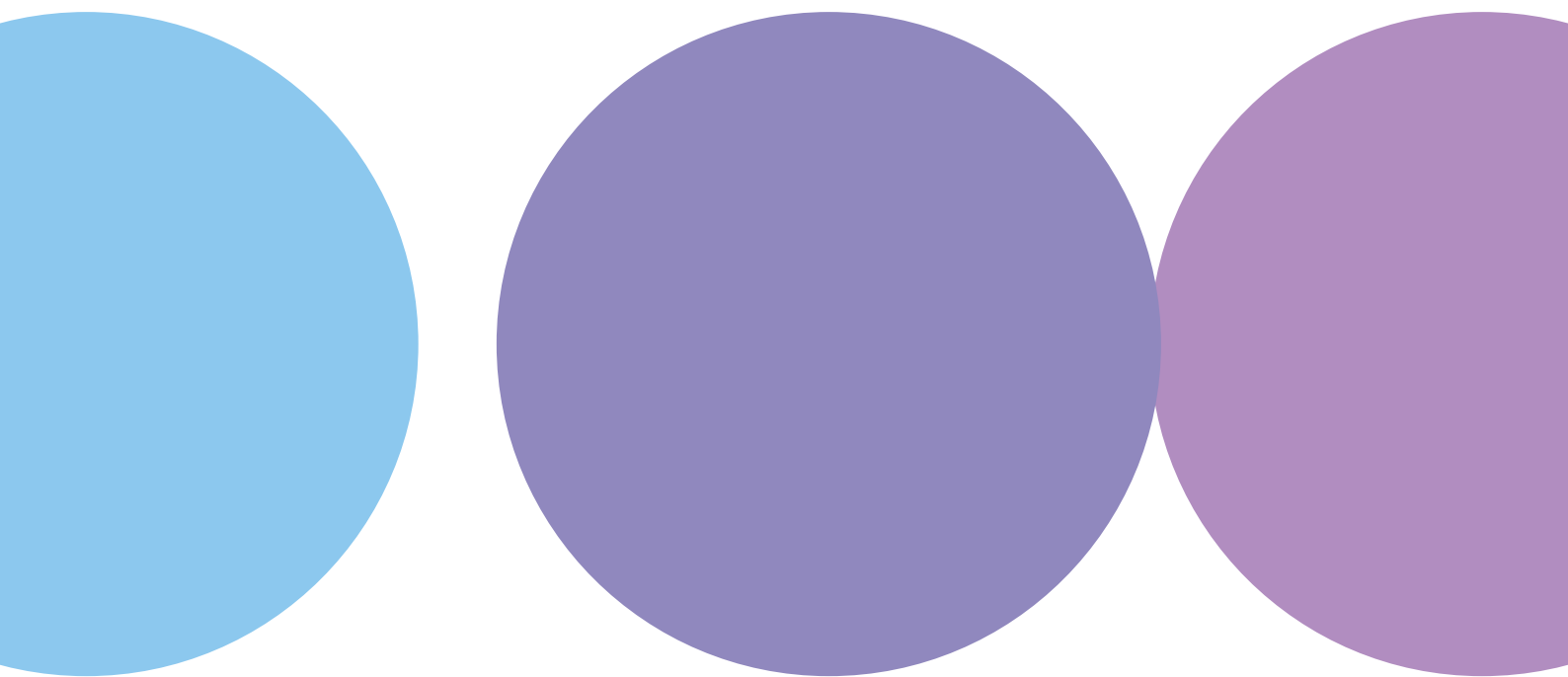|	
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