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# Becoming glocal bureaucrats: mayors, institutions and civil society in smaller cities in Brandenburg during the ‘migration crisis’, 2015–17

Felicitas Hillmann 

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses the positioning of mayors as intermediaries between global governance and local practices in small towns with no previous experience with immigration in the state of Brandenburg in eastern Germany between 2015 and 2017. To gain an empirical insight into the dynamics in these municipalities, the results of a study of eight towns are presented. The analytical focus is on how the redefinition of the mayors’ position took place and what the expectations, experiences and irritations were that accompanied the arrival of refugees. The article highlights how mayors governed civil society involvement and dealt with the (partly xenophobic) resident population. The mayors turned out to be glocal bureaucrats who mediated on an ad hoc basis and with unclear competences between global flows of people, local needs and nationally organized bureaucracies. Their integration in multilevel governance constellations was characterized by ambiguities. At the same time, the new situation of becoming (finally) a place of in-migration provoked minor cracks in a since long petrified institutional setting and in most places led to civil society engagement. Social media acted as ‘fire accelerators’ by picking up a subliminal sense of discontent among the citizens and attributing this feeling to the arrival of the refugees.

## KEYWORDS

mayors; migration crisis; refugees; Brandenburg; civil society; multilevel governance; Germany

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## INTRODUCTION

The current public debate on cities increasingly highlights the crucial position of the mayor for urban transformation by portraying him or her as a key person within changing global governance constellations. In times when big cities point to their cosmopolitan capital and focus on diversity for the sake of economic growth, mayors have started to advocate for more open city policies (Ponzini & Rossi, 2010; Scholten & Penninx, 2016, p. 99). Equipped with excellent universities, architectural highlights and a well-connected mobility infrastructure, these big cities are thus eager to attract all sorts of newcomers. The situation seems to be completely different for smaller cities across Europe. Many of them are losing population and/or are stagnating economically.

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In some exceptional cases – as, for example, in Riace in Italy and Altena in Germany – mayors of such small and medium-sized towns have stepped out as protagonists of migration-friendly local policies. At present, systematic knowledge on the position of the mayor in issues of migration-led regeneration in Europe is generally scarce (see the editorial), some first knowledge about the German situation has been published only very recently (Schammann et al., 2020). Empirical analyses of small and medium-sized towns are yet to come (SVR, 2020). But in response to social tensions, the German federal government has already set up extensive social cohesion programmes in smaller municipalities, pointing to a culture of welcoming.

This article is the first to discuss the positioning of mayors as mediating global governance and local practices in small towns in the *Land* of Brandenburg (hereafter, state) during the so-called migration crisis (2015–17). In contrast to the neighbouring cosmopolitan city Berlin with its existing migration-related networks and institutions, many of these smaller towns with around 40,000 inhabitants then first faced the immigration of refugees, as they were in the territory of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). When refugees started to arrive from 2015, the share of foreigners among the resident population here was around 1%, far below the national average of approximately 10.5%. At the same time, populist tendencies started to dominate the political discourse in many of the municipalities in this state. In some places, the arrival of refugees was accompanied by attacks on refugee accommodations and verbal discrimination. Open xenophobic aggression and populist tendencies became evident.<sup>1</sup> If it is true that mayors in cosmopolitan cities play a prominent role in shaping urban policy, the question arises how mayors in smaller cities can possibly act under such difficult local circumstances?

Referring to the literature on changing urban governance regimes, glocalism and local reception strategies, the role of the mayors is analysed here as becoming a ‘glocal bureaucrat’ in times of what is framed as crises. Three levels of analysis were differentiated to shed a light on the ambiguous multi-level policies he or she has to master: the vertical level, the horizontal level, and the level related to the relationship between newcomers and the resident population, with a focus on right-wing populist action. Regarding these three levels, this article attempts to answer the following questions:

- Vertical integration: How did the redefinition of the mayors’ position take place? What expectations, experiences and irritations went along with the arrival of refugees in these towns by the mayors and in the place of arrival? How did multilevel governance formally play out?
- Horizontal integration: How did the mayors govern civil society involvement? What was the role of informal alliances to cope with the new situation?
- Relationship between the resident population and refugees: How did the mayors deal with extreme right-wing tendencies and populism?

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. It next sketches the theoretical framework on the urban governance of migration, then elaborates on the state of Brandenburg as the case study and reflects on the methodology. Its main focus is on the presentation of the empirical results. The conclusions highlight the most important findings.

## RESTRUCTURING GLOBAL URBAN GOVERNANCE AND LOCAL POSITIONINGS

In response to fundamental economic restructuring and the increasingly globalized flows of capital, goods, ideas and people (Brenner & Keil, 2014), cities started to push for an active role on the global scale, for example, through their aspiration to become global cities or at least globalizing cities within networked societies (Mollenkopf & Castells, 1991). Now, the governance of the different types of migratory flows, including skilled transnational workers, international students, tourists and other privileged groups, has become an asset of urban policies. New information

technologies and transport systems have translated into the mobility turn (Büscher & Urry, 2009) and provoked further adjustments in the way cities tried to organize renewal and regeneration (Hillmann & Pang, 2020). While the economic crisis of the 1970s opened up the city as a laboratory for neoliberal experiments, the global financial crisis in 2008 reinforced the city as a strategic site for global capital accumulation and regulation. Fiscal austerity brought an even stronger focus on a few strategic priorities, for example, on strengthening city partnerships with public and private stakeholders, financial innovation, and involving local stakeholders in rethinking problems and solutions (Oosterlynck & González, 2013, p. 1080). For the cities, this meant that they had to become more competitive with each other and thus needed to attract the right kind of people. Cosmopolitan cities started to intensely cherish their diversity and put more emphasis on branding campaigns, often promoting an inclusive local identity (Gebhardt, 2014, p. 12). This mobilization of selective curations of diversity in the vein of the entrepreneurial city and its role in generating both economic competitiveness and an enhanced cosmopolitanism was accompanied by a marginalization of broader concerns and conflicts on demographic change and participation into processes of decision-making (Raco & Taşan-Kok, 2020, p. 44). During this period of neoliberal restructuring somewhat post-political cities came into life (Crouch, 2019; Legacy et al., 2019, p. 277; Sweeting & Hambleton, 2020). The emergence of inter-urban networks was at the heart of this global urban restructuring (Brenner & Keil, 2014, p. 13). With these dynamics, the role of the mayor got more attention. Now, his or her role was pivotal when it came to communicating with the outside world.

Barber (2013) was the first to argue that cities and especially mayors should take over more responsibilities and powers within this globalized setting. Nation-states, so he claimed, had become dysfunctional to resolve the existing problems and instead mayors should take a leading role in global governance. Cities had to flourish by being much more hospitable to pragmatism, cooperation and networking than in the past. By advocating bottom-up democracy and a glocal civil society, he called for two lines of action: (1) a global parliament of mayors and (2) a combination of bottom-up and top-down approaches. These would eliminate the ‘dysfunctional middle occupied by regional and national governments’ (p. 354) and allow for more democratic development. He conceived the position of the mayor as intermediary between the global and the local scales. Yet, as cities were tied to the decision-making of the nation-state, they lacked the authority to make hard decisions.

Despite criticisms of Barber’s views, a Global Parliament of Mayors came into life in 2016, and nowadays there are about 200 transnational city networks such as Eurocities and Cities of Migration, influencing policymaking more than ever before (Oomen et al., 2018). Not only have mayors started to organize new platforms, but also they increasingly raise their voice.<sup>2</sup>

Also in Europe, the trend of taking action by the mayors can be traced to the 2000s, contributing to what was later labelled as the ‘local turn’. Caponio and Borkert (2010, p. 10) observed that local approaches featuring the mayors started in 2006 when the Rotterdam mayor invited practitioners and policymakers to the Integrating Cities Conference. Here, ‘street-level bureaucrats’ decided to collaborate with religious immigrant organizations because national diversity policies could only partly be strictly enforced at the local level. For Italy, Caponio (2010, pp. 62f.) stated that the topic of immigration already received attention since the early 1990s. Electoral campaigns either highlighted the dangers of immigration (illegal entries, deviant behaviours, prostitution and begging) or immigration was depicted as a resource for the receiving society. This picture of highly diversified local situations also applied to Germany, where the institutional framework of integration policymaking differed from city to city (Engel et al., 2019). Constellations ranged from situations involving all relevant departments in local administration to situations where a single administrative unit – such as the vice-mayor – was responsible for integration-related issues (Aybek, 2010, p. 94, on Munich).

In line with the ‘real world policies’ of branding and curating diversity sketched above, the research literature began a vivid debate about policymaking on migration-related diversity.

Especially the literature on asylum pointed to the fluidity of socio-political orders in this field of migration and emphasized the local negotiation of migration between different actors, actively shaping and rearranging spatial-temporal logics of integration practices. Doomernik and Glorius (2016, p. 435) speak of 'doing asylum' to grasp the complex process of negotiating asylum issues, often decided on the spot. The proponents of the 'local turn' literature took seriously the difficulties of generalizing research findings in these multilevel constellations and pointed to the importance of local in-depth studies (Zapata-Barrero et al., 2017). These would be able to reveal, for example, the bypassing of actors (such as the mayor) within formal and informal local hierarchies (Glorius et al., 2019). Some researchers now also started to concentrate on the role of the mayor as crucial to understanding overall local policies (Glorius et al., 2016; Haselbacher, 2019). Others argued that the role of the municipalities in ensuring more social cohesion through their small-scale policies and potential to actively involve civil society actors (Ambrosini & van der Leun, 2015; Bendel et al., 2019). It appears that cities have become more active in designing policies either in a more reactive style, enhancing integration or as proactive strategies, reconciling civil-society action on migration in favour of urban transformation (Hillmann & Samers, 2021).

Given the increase in populism in many Western countries, scientists started to analytically link the revival of populist discourses to the new migrations. For example, Crouch (2019) explains the mushrooming discontent primarily with the economic restructuring and the disparities that had evolved with neoliberalism. Especially regions outside the main growth centres of the modern economies are home to a population of 'left-behinds'. Sensing their growing disconnectedness from the historical local economy, these 'left-behinds' feel they are no longer competitive and become part of a geography of exclusion. Goodhart (2017) speaks of 'somewheres' and 'anywheres' to indicate the cleavage within contemporary societies between people who are near to the beat of modernism and those who belong to the former industrialized world with its more stable social and spatial relationships. In both approaches the common factor in the rise of populist tendencies was not economic stress, but pessimism about the future. Hostility towards strangers was highest where only very few migrants actually lived. What the residents feared was the arrival of immigrants at a later point and thus they expressed a more general hostility towards cosmopolitan urbanity.

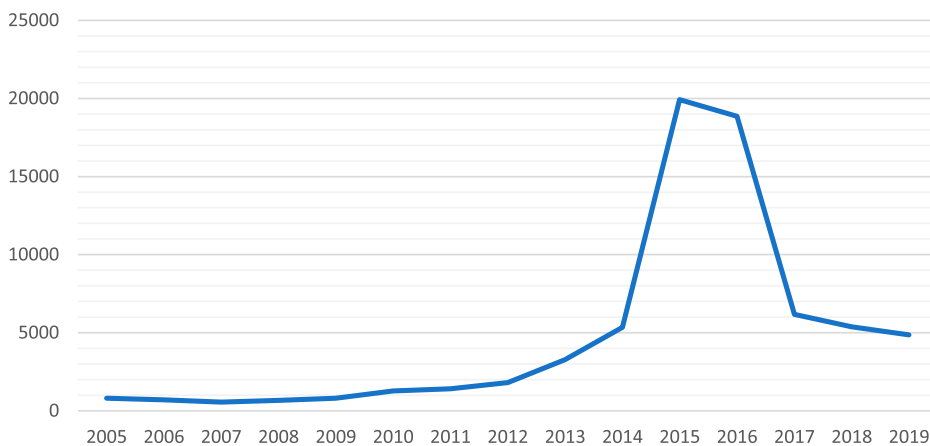
## THE CASE: BRANDENBURG, CASES AND METHODOLOGY

While substantial research has been done on the arrival of refugees in Germany between 2015 and 2017, the literature on the situation of mayors in German cities is limited. There is an important reason for this: in the German government system, cities and municipalities – with the exception of city-states – are guaranteed only a minimal degree of municipal financial sovereignty. For many, sufficient funding has long been a fiction (Sack & Gissendanner, 2007, pp. 29f). The so-called 'free peaks', that is, the freely available income on which the municipalities can ultimately rely after the deduction of compulsory expenditures, have remained low since the 2000s. There are only a few 'zones of decision-making by local government', which have moreover shifted from 'local parties bound to the milieu and the majority fractions in the council to public-private networks of service provision' (p. 32). Instead, the control capacities have been converted into intermunicipal and 'polycentral arrangements of different networks' (p. 33). In this constellation, local governance is 'increasingly determined by the respective personal leadership qualities of the office holders' (pp. 29f.). Heinelt (2018) points out that the size of the city plays an important role in the exercise of the mayoral office. The smaller the city, the less important the party affiliation of the mayoral candidates seems to be, and local honours appear to be more important for the decision-making process. Currently, about 1000 mayor positions are vacant across Germany – mirroring how unattractive the position is considered to be (Erhardt, 2020a).

Some characteristics of this professional group are known (Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2008): most mayors were between 49 and 59 years old and most already had adult children. Most had a university degree, and 70% came from the region where they held office. At 2%, mayors with a migration background were a rarity. With 94% of all mayors being male, male-dominated power structures prevailed and, related to this, the mayor's position was rarely combined with family duties. These characteristics are also portrayed in a more recent study confirming the average mayor is male, middle aged and middle class (Heinelt, 2018) and, so we might add, white-native. According to another recent survey, the gender gap has even widened: the share of female mayors decreased from 11% in 2015 to 9% in 2020 (Erhardt, 2020b). Moreover, the more residents a city had, the less likely it was to be governed by a female mayor. One of the mayors' main activities were the representation of the town, for example, through participation in events, festivals, openings, etc. Pätzold and Reimann (2018) found the 'production of imaginary and real coherence' to be the most important task of mayors. The organization of the community and securing of social participation were central to their work, in the tension between 'moderating and doing'.

## Brandenburg

The State of Brandenburg surrounds the city of Berlin and consists of 113 small and medium-sized cities in 14 administrative districts. Apart from the regional capital Potsdam, the smaller cities have been affected by high unemployment since Reunification. However, in the past years of economic boom they have regained some strength. Roughly speaking, most cities are still affected by the out-migration of the young, well-qualified population (among them especially women) as long they are not near to the capital city Berlin. As a result of this out-migration, vacancies are prevalent in many places and inner cities are deserted and provided with few shopping opportunities – even though nationwide urban development subsidies have been invested since 2002. Furthermore, demographic change started earlier and is more marked than in western German municipalities (Figure 1). Birth rates continue to be low since Reunification. The numerical peak of the refugee crisis in Brandenburg was during the period 2015/16 (Figure 1). The many asylum seekers were first assigned via the *Königsteiner Schlüssel*<sup>3</sup> by the federal state to one of the four arrival centres (*Erstaufnahmeeinrichtungen*) in Brandenburg and next



**Figure 1.** Request on asylum applications (first and continued, in total) in the county of Brandenburg. Sources: BAMF (2020): Aktuelle Zahlen – Edition Juni 2020. Available online: <https://www.bamf.de/SharedDocs/Anlagen/DE/Statistik/AsylinZahlen/aktuelle-zahlen-juli-2020.html?nn=284722>, graph by the author.



redistributed to the various municipalities. Between 1991 and 2018, the share of foreigners among all residents rose from 0.7% to 5.0%.

### The selection of cases and methodology

Out of the 113 cities that make up the state of Brandenburg, 70 cities with more than 5000 inhabitants were identified. We classified them according to further statistical data and several features of the mayors: year of birth, his or her party affiliation and year of taking office. The biographical data showed that all mayors were born after 1950. One-third were over 60 years old when they were in office, one-third were between 50 and 60 years old, and one-third were between 40 and 50 years old. A total of 56 mayors were male and 14 female.

In addition, we scrutinized statistical data on the number or proportion of citizens with a foreign passport or refugee status. An important selection criterion for the sampling was that there was an active policy towards integration recognized by BAMF (Federal Office for Migration and Refugees), indicating an active integration policy. The size of the cities selected for our sample was between 12,000 and 57,000 inhabitants; the majority had around 40,000 inhabitants. We identified and approached nine cities to be part of our in-depth study – of which only one declined participation.

To simplify the heterogeneity of these (eight remaining) cities, we categorized them into four types: (1) regional growth centres, targeted by strategies of the state government after a phase of economic decline after Reunification to attract new businesses; (2) cities oriented towards tourism with local features of supra-regional interest such as spa and health resorts; (3) cities belonging to the agglomeration area of Berlin and prospering since Reunification, showing a steep increase of the resident population, including movers from crowded Berlin; and (4) a residual category for all cities that could not be easily assigned to any of the previous three types.

Since city types 1 and 2 were supposed to stabilize or increase their population figures and, above all, to attract visitors, we conducted most interviews in these cities. Furthermore, we included two border cities with shrinking populations and two cities that in the past proved to be particularly open to receiving refugees (4-P and 1-E).<sup>4</sup> For a closer examination of the type 2 cities, we selected two cities whose mayors clearly opposed hostility (2-L and 2-T). For both the agglomeration area of Berlin (3-B) and for type 4 (4-P) we selected one case (Table 1). This way, we sought to respond methodologically to the very fragmented institutional setting within the state.<sup>5</sup>

With one exception, all cities in our sample lost between 18% and 44% of their inhabitants since Reunification, and the average rate of unemployment was above the state average of 4.8% in 2019. Five of our interviewed mayors had been in office for at least 10 years. The party affiliation of the mayors in the eight cities was reflecting the full range of democratic parties (Table 1).

We approached the mayors' offices via letter and phone to fix the appointment for an interview. In three out of eight cases the interview took place in the presence of another person next to the mayor. We used semi-standardized questionnaires covering the following fields of interest: local governance and administrative networking, cooperation with civil society and migration-related institutions, and reactions of the resident population, including xenophobic actions and populist discourses. Covid-19 stopped our interviews for eight months (February–October 2020). In the second phase we interviewed seven key players from civil society and institutions as an additional resource to better contextualize our findings. All interviews were conducted in German, either in the offices of the interviewees or via Zoom (three). Our empirical research was designed as a small study and never intended to be a representative study.

## EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

As outlined above, we expected the role of the mayors to change during the 'migration crisis' not only in respect of a reset of their vertical and horizontal integration, but also concerning their

**Table 1.** Overview of the case selection and interviewing.

Type		Size of population	Interview partner	Gender, Party-Affiliation, (in office since)	Pop.dynamics since 1990	Share of residents older than 65 years (2019)	Unemployment Rate (2019)	Share of non-German population (1991/2019)	
1	S	29,920	Mayor	M, SPD, (2005)	-44%	33%	10,9%	1,2% / 4,7%	
	F	57,873	Mayor	M, Left, (2018)	-33%	26%	6,5%	1,1% / 11,8%	
	P	12,141	Mayor	F, independent, (2015)	-19%	28%	12,3%	0,4% / 4,9%	
	E	40,387	Mayor	M, FDP, (2006)	-24%	26%	8,5%	1% / 7,1%	
	IO		Integration officer						
2	L	16,021	Mayor	M, CDU, (2000)	-32%	31%	5,5%	1,2% / 6,2%	
			Civil Society Actor						
	T	16,320	Mayor	M, Left, (2010)	-18%	28%	7%	0,1% / 2,1%	
			Migration officer						
			Civil Society Actor						
3	B	38,825	Mayor	M, Left, (2014)	+62%	23%	3,9%	0,3% / 6,5%	
			Local Integration officer						
4	P	19,024	Mayor	M, independent, (2009)	-19%	27%	6,2%	0,2% / 8,3%	
			Local Integration officer						
			Civil Society Actor						

Sources: Own calculations, consultation on regional statistics, LBV Landesamt für Verkehr Brandenburg.



relationship with the resident population and rising populism. Considering the first point, their vertical integration, the mayors had to adjust their relationship to formal procedures (regulatory and institutional) and informal practices (mostly related to civil society), and also had to communicate to the resident population that migration – somewhat as a by-product of globalization – had arrived on the shores of their small towns in the form of refugees. And they had to communicate that this would induce regional change for all. In the following we present our research findings according to the research questions outlined above.

### Vertical reset: redefining the mayor's role – experiences between expectations and irritations

All mayors stated that they were seen as the central contact persons by the different groups involved: from the side of the city administration, the resident population and the refugees. Apparently, all three groups were hopeful that the mayor could handle an overall confusing situation. Accordingly, all mayors interviewed emphasized the importance of leadership and attitude. Several times we heard that the (male) mayor was perceived by the refugees as a central contact person, as 'a mixture of Putin and [an] American sheriff' – so one mayor stated (1-P). His or her personal approach would make it easy for the residents and immigrants alike to contact the mayor and to express their aspirations – so most of them said. What expectations, experiences and irritations were reported in our interviews about the new situation of becoming a place of immigration?

#### Expecting changes

The mayors themselves described their actions during the refugee migration crisis as 'chaotic acting from day-to-day' (1-F). They underlined that they were the person to be in the front, as a polarizing figure that was always under observation (2-L). They had to convey an optimistic attitude and did not want to send social workers to the front line when it came to discussions with the native resident population (2-T, 1-S, 4-P, 2-L, 2-T, 1-P). Standing at the forefront was understood as men's business: 'Well, it was also important that the mayor should say, from a male perspective: *Chefsache* ... must stand right in front, and not let problems come up first' (1-P). The only female mayor interviewed expressed the same less heroically, saying that being a mayor in the time meant 'working 24/7'. The mayors were fully aware of the expectations of the native resident population that things simply had to function and that it was their job to make this happen:

They residents want the city to function. In a way, the Germans always want there to be Daddy upstairs, somebody who cares, who is there. That's why Mrs Merkel is the mom, she's always elected the same way, because you know that you want peace, order and security, that's what you want in Germany ... that the sidewalks are in order. (1-E)

The mayors portrayed five concrete difficulties when dealing with immigration: inadequate information provision, unclear competences, lengthy and opaque administrative procedures and little support from above, in combination with a yet absent migration-related infrastructure. Several mayors felt disadvantaged due to missing statistical information (2-L, 3-B). They had to gather information themselves from the job centre, Foreigners Authority, basic security office, registration office and a variety of local authorities. Moreover, the local foreigners authorities had been underutilized for years and as a result could not cope with the new situation:

The Foreigners Authority in Brandenburg ... is fragmented into small district administrations and they were completely overrun by the tasks in 2015. What did they have to do before that? They had nothing

to do. ... And so, of course, the technical competence in the foreigners registration offices is as good as they can do the work. (3-B)

With a few exceptions (2-T, 4-P), our conversations repeatedly revealed that the competencies of the mayor and the administration were not clear in the period 2015–17. The mayors had obviously expected the multilevel governance setting of the federal, the counties and the local levels to be more reliable than it turned out to be in a crisis situation. In some cases, the mayors said that they had to work outside jurisdiction because they were confronted with situations for which no existing regulations did apply (3-B). Other times they faced difficult situations they could not really change, for example, when refugees needed psychological help (2-L). Our interview partners generally felt to be left to their own devices. The ministries, for instance, did not offer them workshops or a platform for exchange and networking; the working group of towns and regions (*Städte- und Gemeindebund*) did little to help as those platforms did not function as a place of honest exchange, but rather served to present the own town as performing greatly (3-B). One mayor, though, said they met their colleagues three to four times a year (1-P).

About half the mayors were disappointed about the scarce help ‘top-down’ – a wish they themselves had also noticed among the resident population. Financial support came a long way before it, possibly, reached city administrations at all: first it was allocated to the state by the federal government, and then it had to be redistributed by the ministries to the municipalities. In any case, this meant a considerable delay and therefore left little leeway for the planning of the municipal administrations upon their arrival in the municipality.<sup>6</sup> It was, moreover, not clear how much money municipalities would get for supporting a refugee in a structurally weak economic setting (2-MO). Several interview partners criticized the slow legislation and the inertia of the authorities (1-P, 4-LIO). While it was possible to change building laws to respond to need of accommodation, the changing of other regulations concerning integration, seemed not to work. Also, traditional institutions such as the Chamber of Commerce and Industry ‘had totally failed’ – so some said about the slow response of these interest groups (2-T) – and the network of welfare organizations was weak (2-LIO). Despite these criticisms, at the same time, things started to change in almost all city administrations. For example, the specialized migration services moved into the town hall and new employees were hired almost everywhere – although often only after prepayment for the new personnel (1-S).

Finally, our interviews with institutional key players confirmed that after 2018 a more flexible and migration-related social infrastructure had emerged (2-MO, 2-LIO), with subsidiary or main offices for integration. Some civil society actors also said they perceived the municipal administrations as petrified. If there were some sort of renewal through the engagement of civil society, the only places that could be used were the spaces that had been set up for migrants (2-LIO), so they claimed. Increasingly, the strengthening of democratic development in the region was used as an antidote against populism and to remain attractive to all sorts of newcomers (young families, tourists) (2-MO). A few towns started to hire refugees to work in the city administrations and some cities tried to organize their resources in a one-stop system (1-F); others realized they were missing such instruments (1-E) or that structures were dissolved (2-L). Yet, the recent set-up of the migration-related infrastructure such as *Weltoffene Kommune*<sup>7</sup> was rather expected to help natives to become active in the civil society and this way to prevent populist liaisons (2-LIO, 2-MO).

Pointing to the small size of their municipalities, some of the mayors highlighted they had an advantage over the district mayors of Berlin because they had more capabilities and did not just ‘have to organize administration’ – and thus contradicted what other mayors expressed as a disadvantage. Being a small city helped to establish ‘fast and effective help’ because everyone knew someone resourceful (2-L, 1-S, 1-F, 2-L) and it prevented anonymous situations (3-B). About

half the mayors reported seeing many refugees returning to them to express their gratitude (1-F, 4-P, 1-P).

### *Experiencing to be a place of immigration*

All interviewed mayors said that they were completely surprised by the arrival of refugees. With some exceptions, refugees came to the city for the first time (2-MO, 4-P, 2-T, 3-B). The intensity of the reactions of the resident population clearly depended on whether or not the city had experienced immigration in the past, the persistent mindset of many middle-aged people and the way immigration to Germany had been framed by the local politicians.

The mayors often encountered a mentality among the local/resident population that bespoke unfamiliarity in dealing with refugees. In the former GDR, the few immigrants were normally isolated from the majority population:

One simply has to understand that we were a city out of the East German mentality during GDR times, which was very strongly ... occupied by the Soviet armed forces. There were 30,000 to 40,000 people stationed here. ... Angolans were here and Vietnamese, but they were shielded from the population. ... Then we had, if you like, an island existence here in East Germany for almost 25 years as far as refugees are concerned. (1-E)

A repeated argument was that disappointment about immigration was inevitable because the citizens had not been prepared for Germany to actually be an immigration country:

We have been telling people for years that we are not an immigration country, nobody has to come here. We don't want that, we shut ourselves off and so on and suddenly, overnight. ... Now a million people are coming here. I believe that politicians have to ask themselves to some extent whether they have not made a mistake in the run-up to this ... and will have problems with this situation of being an immigration country. (1-S, in similar words 1-P)

The mayors reported that the cityscape had hardly changed – except that now more people from abroad had become visible, especially so when the city hosted academics from abroad (1-F). Three mayors said the only striking thing was that there was now more crime in certain areas, as police statistics would also confirm (4-P, 1-F, 1-P). They said that the concentration of refugees in some housing units had led to the establishment of security patrols in town (1-F, 2-L, 1-P). One mayor was clearly against this as ‘it would send a wrong signal’ (2-T).

The mayors tried to avoid the emergence of segregated communities in town and preferred mixing, as, according to some (1-F, 4-P, 2-L, 3-B), this would calm down people who claimed that their houses would lose value because refugees settled nearby (2-L, 4-P, 2-MO). Some municipalities had the advantage of having their own resources for municipal housing, in some cases up to one third of all housing (2-L, 1-S). This way, a ‘complete block of refugees’ could be avoided. It was also reported several times that some groups, for example, the Chechens, developed militant structures in the refugee homes and violently repressed the other groups, causing major troubles in the town (2-MO, 2-T, 1-P).

Nearly all cities quickly provided decentralized accommodation (1-F), which was also proudly underlined by the interviewees from civil society (2-MO, 4-LIO). Elsewhere, the private housing market was the only regulator of the new demand, which usually led to a concentration of refugees, mostly in the prefabricated, former socialist housing estates. One of our respondents underlined that the refugees were now (December 2020) tolerated, but somewhat seen as second-class citizens (2-MO), which resulted in the refugees lived a life on ‘hold’ (2-L, 2-T).

Only in a few cities could the mayors fall back on the migrants’ self-organizations, for example, when immigration had already taken place before or where natives lived that had re-

migrated after their stay in western Germany (1-E). Initially, some mayors had hoped they could curb the population decline in their city by binding immigrants to their place, but generally this proved unfeasible (1-S, 4-P). In other towns, after their arrival, many refugees migrated to the big cities to join relatives and friends and it appeared that their invested energy did not pay off. A sorting process had started in which the better qualified left for the larger cities in or near western Germany, while the less educated tended to stay in place (2-LIO, 2-MO, 2-T, 1-P). This further fed the feeling of being on the periphery of Berlin, only (1-S).

### *Irritations when integrating into the local fabric*

Integration into the local fabric is stimulated by participation on the labour market, social interaction and education. Here, existing structural barriers became salient. In general, there was some disillusionment about the chances of swiftly integrating refugees into the labour market among the mayors. At the time of the interviewing, the offer was still mainly for manual or unskilled workers or jobs for education and traineeship. Initially, some companies had also hoped to solve their skilled worker problem by hiring refugees. However, this did not work (1-F). The main problems repeatedly mentioned were insufficient language skills and the lack of recognition of professional qualifications (often informal degrees or different educational systems) (1-S). Some older refugees had given up their job search (1-F). In a few cases, there was irritation about cultural differences, such as the lack of punctuality or slower work performance during Ramadan, which hindered successful labour market integration (2-L). In sharp contrast to blaming the migrants for their poor performance, it was the estimate that migrant employees were blocked by a negative atmosphere by native colleagues – often in moments when the boss was not present (2-MO, 3-LOI) – even though some of the companies were international ones (1-S).

In Germany, the job centres are a joint task of the district and federal government. So, in many cases, education centres (*Bildungsträger*) took care of the labour market integration of refugees, in four cities also church organizations were involved in this (4-P, 2-L, 2-P, 3-B). When considering the procedures entrenched with the positioning of refugees in the labour markets, the mayors were particularly critical of the ministerial bureaucracy. They complained that young people were running out of time due to the sluggish processes in the administration: ‘They are three years rotten in the formative phase.’ Some of these young refugees had been in town for four years and had not yet learned the language (1-E, 4-CSA). The mayors called for more compulsory courses. As a result of the difficult labour market integration, many Syrians were accommodated in temporary employment agencies. A privately organized job fair at the asylum-seekers’ home was relatively successful (2-T). In one city, craft enterprises hired refugees and thus covered their skilled labour needs (1-F). However, the catering, service and cleaning industries in particular had little success in integrating refugees. Where possible, the mayors supported the use of local manpower to influence the integration process. Often, these were retired teachers or department heads (3-B, 1-E, 2-T, 1-P):

Then we said about the AWO [a welfare institution], we pay a force there who works sideways in the area, that does a bit of coordination, some volunteering. ... In this respect, we asked the retired head of office to return. ... You also have to intervene a bit to control the situation. (3-B)

According to some interviewees, the problems with the labour market integration were self-made, on the side of both the institutions and the migrants. For example, refugees would simply have too high expectations of their future income: ‘Under certain circumstances, they could go to school for eight years and then earn 1,800 euros net. That is what many people cannot imagine’ (3-B). Here, the mayors addressed a structural weakness of the German social security system, which in some sectors shows only a minimal or even a negative salary gap between people on

low income and benefit recipients. After a while, many refugees realized this and gave up their aspirations:

I have often heard this myself from refugees: why should I work at a baker's and go there at 5 a.m. And I get 800 euros for that. If I take all the subsidies I get in Germany without going to work, I get 1,200 euros. I'd be stupid. (1-E)

An occupation in the formal labour market would not allow them to transfer money to their families in the place of origin (2-MO). One of the integration officers underlined that due to the weak economic structure of the region only social integration, based on a combination of welfare benefits and local personal networks, was possible for refugees.

However, a new phenomenon appeared to be the integration of refugee women in the care sector. Three mayors pointed to the gendered and increasingly accepted tendency to hire female migrants for the care of the elderly and emphasized the very high motivation among this group (2-T, 2-MO, 3-B). Also, migrant economies, mostly as self-employment in the gastronomy, started to evolve in some places (1-IO, 2-MO, 4-LIO).

### Horizontal reset: the governance of civil society involvement

One of the interviewed mayors (1-S) explained that the involvement of civil society in their medium-sized cities allowed them to act quickly, while also shifting the responsibilities: 'There you can thank the volunteers for getting the chestnuts out of the fire, because the state support came only much later.' Three of our respondents (2-MO, 1-E, 2-LIO) claimed that it were mainly either young people who had been educated in the western school system that had been introduced after Reunification or the older people who had experienced at first hand what it meant to be a refugee after the Second World War. What seemed to be missing were the strata of middle-aged people who had been socialized during the GDR times. *Weltoffenheit* (a cosmopolitan lifestyle) was an absent notion in that educational system (2-MO).

The involvement of civil society in coping with the crisis gave the mayors room for manoeuvre to work better with the unclear administrative competences and allowed them to better understand the problems and needs of the refugees (1-S). The mayors relied on what sections of the local population and media mocked as *Gutmenschen* during these years: people who altruistically welcomed the migrants (2-MO), actively guided refugee families (1-S, 4-P, 1-E, 2-L), collected clothes and furniture for them or organized sport events for and with them (2-L). When considering school education, the mayors reported that not all teacher positions in their schools were filled and that the education system had been understaffed for a long time (2-LIO, 2-MO). There was plenty of goodwill from civil society, but there was little mutual consultation among the volunteers (2-MO), bearing the risk of fragmentation (1-F). Legislative contradictions could lead to extremely difficult situations and a lot of patience was needed to deal with conflicting procedures (1-S, 2-L). Such was also expressed by mayor 1-E:

There are six people sitting at the table, social workers, diagnosticians, the school management and where you think about what you have to do now to support children who have a tolerated status,<sup>8</sup> ... You don't get anywhere somehow. (1-E)

The mayors said that the integration of the children and their learning of the German language was especially important because it allowed them to get into contact with the refugee parents (2-L). Apart from their strong engagement in school issues of the newcomers' children, the involvement of civil society served as a tool to create greater social cohesion in town (2-MO, 1-E, 2-L, 4-P, 1-P). Rather than dividing, the increase in cultural diversity helped prevent conflicts among the different refugee groups:

We have a lot of people who are intensively involved in city life, who have co-founded their own places – meeting places, places of cultural diversity, where events and dialogue take place, where social life is really actively enriched, and which also ensure that integration takes place and that the refugees are kept together. There seems to be less fragmentation and no small groups that then become a problem. (1-F, in similar words 1-S)

One town immediately collected money (€40,000) upon the arrival of the refugees and invented a slogan ‘The town helps’. Like other towns it set up its own integration office and supported the establishment of a so-called round table of welcome culture by reviving networks set up in the 1990s against xenophobic action. This phenomenon of revitalizing existing networks appeared to be more common (e.g., *Aktionsbündnis Brandenburg*, 3-CSO, also 2-MO).

Two towns in our sample had institutions of higher education (1-F, 1-E). They had international students who were involved in campaigns and activities such as Refugees Welcome and *Flüchtlingsrat Brandenburg*. One mayor explained that the eagerness to help refugees backed his attempts to involve civil society:

I can remember the first residents’ meetings, when I expected that there would be enormous resistance and then I was very enthusiastic about the students of the applied sciences department, the parishes and the large social associations. They immediately took matters in their own hands and asked: what can we do? That was something, of course, it made clear from the beginning how we judged the process, and I personally found that strategically extremely important. (1-E)

Much of the work with civil society took place at neighbourhood festivals, or, for example, by offering Christmas parties (1-S, 2-L, 1-P), a circus project (1-E), youth clubs or open houses (2-T). Unlike in cosmopolitan cities, the novelty for the local residents consisted of positive experiences, often related to the culinary delights that were served by the refugees:

One of the first Syrians here has gained independence by importing specialities. ... This is a total enrichment for us. People think it’s good. They also think it’s great when there are individual examples of people who have already found work and so on. ... Negative experiences are rather that it is so difficult to communicate with the neighbours, because it is not so easy to understand each other. The employees complain that the workload within the municipality is simply higher, because interpreters are not so easy to find here. (1-P, same content 4-P)

A side effect of the involvement of civil society into the integration processes seemed to be that populist behaviour in the towns was reduced and, as one mayor put it, ‘more humanist behaviour was stimulated’ (2-L). Several other mayors made similar comments (2-T, 4-P). Realistically, one mayor saw that enthusiasm would cease at a later point in time:

I wanted to avoid conflict and to be very conscious that this welcome culture is also partially lived. But that’s during the euphoria, alike Mrs Merkel, first the Selfies<sup>9</sup> and everyone is happy and gives presents. And when everyday life arrives, we notice it is getting more difficult. (1-E)

Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) argued that changes would remain superficial because the mayors had an interest in presenting their municipalities as cosmopolitan, but had no interest in investing in this (3-CSA). The line of thinking among the municipalities seemed to be ‘from now on foreclosure to the outside, and support for those refugees that had come in’ (2-LIO). Further, civil society actors spoke of a schizophrenic situation and contradictory interventions by the different government institutions in the same state. While the Ministry of Social Affairs and the Ministry for Health organized support for the refugees, the ministry for the interiors was organizing deportation to the countries of origin at the same time (4-CSA).



## New relationships: between welcoming and hostile

Most interview partners perceived times of immigration as times of change. Change provoked problem-solving skills, a reanimation of public life in sports and cultural institutions (4-P), but also ‘more watching and grumbling’ on the part of the resident population (2-L). In two towns, we found a generally positive attitude of the locals towards the newcomers: ‘It was definitely a very nice time around the voluntary engagement here and the initiatives ... fortunately, we did not have attacks on foreign citizens at all’ (2-L, similar 4-P).

Most interviewed mayors searched to adapt their external communication style by presenting migration from the outset ‘not as a problem, but rather as a challenge among other things’ (1-E, similar: 1-S, 1-F, 3-B). In most towns, populism and right-wing activities emerged alongside the welcoming activities of civil society. The mayors saw the limits to their reasoning as it would not drastically influence the feelings of the resident population:

And you have to respect that, you can't argue away feelings and you can't make them go away with facts and data or just for a short moment. ... You have to reach people by feelings and that's what we try to do. (1-F, similar: 1-P)

All mayors understood the ambivalence of the situation. Some felt that they could not make full use of existing laws without being attacked by parts of the civil society in town. Some stated that the mainstream opinion about a strict implementation of the existing laws was too lax. Some of them frankly blamed ‘urban liberal positions’, somewhat pro-migrant, at stake:

If you explain that you ... apply [the laws] a bit harder there ... you will very quickly be assigned to a right-wing camp – ‘Law and Order’. Well, I am for law and order. I want this to be a clean city. I also wish that certain crimes and offences were more severely punished. But today it is also ... mainstream to be more lax in everything. (1-P)

Latent xenophobic statements could also be found in some of the mayors' narratives. They thought, for example, that Berlin was simply ‘overmigrated’ and that this was one reason for people to move from Berlin to the Brandenburg towns (3-B).

In a number of towns under study, assemblies of the extreme right, including the AfD (the right-wing party Alternative for Germany), took place. The mayors openly admitted that there was ‘in every community a latent right-wing attitude’ and that this had ‘always been a topic’ (1-E) and was increasing (1-S), even if the masses were indifferent to the right-wing activities and simply not expressing themselves (2-MO). In 1-P, there were assemblies of as much as 500 fellows. Repeatedly, we heard the claim that in such meetings at least 50% of the cadres and activists came from elsewhere, not from the town itself. In nearly all towns in our sample the mayors organized citizen meetings to allow people to ‘grumble’ and ‘blow off some steam’ (2-T, 4-P, 1-P).

Frequently, the mayors participated in manifestations to oppose right-wing marches, got up on stage and allied with schools in anti-racism days (1-E). Time and again, there were right-wing hate speeches and arguments between young people of German nationality and young people of other nationalities. These conflicts were sometimes attributed to the adolescent age of the persons involved and brushed away.

In some cases, the mayors accepted the prejudices of their voters, especially the older voters. They knew their election depended on this group and did not expect that the existing ways of thinking could be changed. According to the mayors, not only had the small-town citizens long lived an insular existence, but even more so the new media acted as ‘fire accelerators’ by picking up a subliminal sense of discontent among the citizens and attributing this feeling to the arrival of the refugees. There would be a hidden agenda, expressing the wish to keep the rest of the



world out of one's own life, at work: 'The perception has been, as it often is, like: Oh, don't let the problem come so close to me' (2-L).

The local press frequently discussed the presence of refugees, tending to highlight the scandals and sometimes spreading fake news. Several mayors admitted that they themselves were not always able to differentiate between fake and true news (1-P, 4-P). In one town, a neo-Nazi, known to be a member of the right-wing association *Spreelichter*, which is under surveillance by the office for the protection of the constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*), filmed how he fenced his house to protect himself from the planned arrival of 130 refugees. He put the film online, triggering a series of hate speech from citizens. Consequently, the mayor of the town received threatening letters and withdrew. Social media became a new channel to quite freely and uncensored express opinions:

I believe the right-wing ideas are racist and xenophobic. ... The mass distribution of social media such as Facebook came in handy at the time of this wave of migration. It has of course also suddenly provided an outlet for all kinds of statements that would never have been made in Germany before ... made it legitimate to express things in a way that would have led to criminal proceedings three years earlier, or at least social exclusion. (3-B)

This changed atmosphere was felt not only by the mayors, but also by almost all public figures, so interviewees stated (2-MO). Solidarity eroded, revealing a lack of respect for and trust in 'offices, authorities and public service personalities'. This development did not come unexpectedly, but reanimated former local conflicts:

We have a problem with a group of inhabitants since long. ... It does not all have to do with the wave of refugees, but rather coincides in time and then finds its expression in the question of migration. But that is actually when the acceptance of state action suddenly began to be called into question. ... That you can call any mayor 'a complete idiot' in public with complete impunity and say things like 'He is too stupid to tip over a bucket of water' and also more personally that 'the fat pig should get up from his desk.' (3-B)

In two cities, this loss of respect for the institutions led to the mayors themselves becoming the target of hate comments and threats of violence. In both cases, security measures were taken.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study allows for a number of analytical deductions, even though we were confronted with different situations across the state of Brandenburg. Also, our research was tied to a certain period in time – so our results must be interpreted carefully. They can be summarized in six points. First, most importantly, the reactions of society as a whole to the arrival of migrants in our selected towns seemed to make visible underlying currents of broader societal changes, such as generational change, peripheralization and sometimes the fear of becoming part of a more mobile world. Repeatedly, our respondents pointed out that there was not so much of a cosmopolitan attitude in their towns. Only exceptionally did the mayors relate the existing xenophobic populism and hostility to economic stress or fear of the future – as claimed in the literature. Instead, they stated that for a long time the residents of their towns in eastern Germany had been unaware that the rest of the country had long been an immigrant destination and now suddenly realized this different reality.

Second, in all eight towns the will to cope with difficult situations was present. The position of the mayor itself was highly ambivalent. Mayors not only needed to be respected by both the local and refugee population, but they were also supposed to act top-down and to exercise the competencies required for solving problems on an ad hoc basis. However, day to day, the mayors operated

in a grey area of administrative regulations and acceptance. They definitively occupied an intermediate position between the concrete local needs and the global situation of increased migratory flows and can thus be considered global bureaucrats. The dysfunctionality of the intermediary position as outlined by Barber (2013) was reflected in our sample, for example, when the mayors spoke about the inertia of the bureaucracy – even though it were smaller and not big cities.

Third, the involvement of civil society actors helped the mayors to navigate in a highly fragmented field with no clear responsibilities for at least the years 2016/17. While part of the resident population appreciated the new diversity brought in by the refugees and engaged in festivities and support activities, others felt confronted with a world far from theirs and were hostile to all forms of cosmopolitanism.

Fourth, former experiences with the arrival of people from other countries allowed for more civil engagement and more openness within a town. For ‘welcoming’ the current inflow of migrants and refugees’ networks from the 1990s were reactivated. It seemed to be either the elderly or the younger people who took care of the immigrants. According to the interviewees, these people’s own migration experiences and education respectively would play an important role in this.

Fifth, social media worked as an accelerator for populist movements and undercut democratic standards that were in charge for many years. In addition to an often officially presented welcome culture, there was an erosion of respect for local authorities and public figures – such as the mayor – among parts of the resident population. The introduction of programmes of the federal government for social cohesion could be interpreted as an attempt to cope with this lost trust in democratic processes and as directed mainly to the resident population.

Sixth, the presence of educational institutions (such as universities) worked as an antidote to populism. The tendencies in migration-related local governance as portrayed in the academic literature on bigger cities, for example, the selective curation of diversity and organization of mayors in interurban networks, was, however, only observed to a limited extent. Only very recently a new strata of academically trained employees had entered the local administrations, some of whom were educated in migration and intercultural studies. In some places they instigated change in a rather petrified administrative structure with many elder civil servants.

That said, the migration to the Brandenburg towns brought many changes within a setting of multilevel governance. As regards the revival of the labour market and halt to population decline was concerned, expectations were in many cases not fulfilled. These processes were too complex and skills and positions could not be acquired as quickly as all parties had hoped for. A main result of our study is that many mayors saw the production of social cohesion as the most urgent goal of future local development that in all cities an active civil society was seen as essential in overcoming the crisis situation. It was a task that was better accomplished through constant and resourceful democratic support than through top-down leadership. Here our research is in line with what has been reported by recent studies on the role of municipalities in Europe: formal and informal hierarchies were re-established and the role of civil society actors was crucial (Bendel et al., 2019; Glorius et al., 2019). Even more, our research on the eight cities indicates that a strong mayor figure is only productive for urban society in a situation of acute crisis. As soon as there is a need for a long-term perspective that encompasses social cohesion, the mayor can only indirectly influence civil society. In short, the situation of the mayors ‘on the ground’ was far less glamorous for the mayors than the literature on cosmopolitan realities suggests.

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## NOTES

1. This xenophobic atmosphere was also expressed in the attacks on migration-friendly mayors or politicians in western Germany (knife attacks on Reker in Cologne in 2016 and on Hollstein in Altena in 2017; murder of Lübke in Kassel in 2019).
2. See the 5th Mayoral Forum on Human Mobility, Migration and Development and other occasions in which mayors and city leaders from all over the world explicitly focused on the topic of migration and minorities.
3. The refugees are distributed to the *Länder* via this calculation, taking into consideration population size (one-third) and tax revenues (two-thirds). The quota are calculated on an annual basis.
4. In the following, capital letters indicate the town/mayor being quoted.
5. Integration policies and migration management of the mayors in Germany are in general highly fragmented. The SVR (2020, p. 25) identifies seven types: agents without control claim, mayors as integration managers, outsourcing, volunteers working as integration manager, institutionalized integration managers as lonely wolfs, mainstreaming and one-stop shop. The authors identify a broad spectrum of formal/informal, centralized/decentralized, and person-centred and professionalized constellations in the context of changing modes of financing.
6. According to one interview partner, small cities were generally allowed to provide an allowance of €2000 within 14 days and €7500 within a month to the refugees.
7. While working on our empirical study, four programmes were introduced related to the issues discussed here: ‘Weltoffene Kommune’ by the Bertelsmann-Foundation; ‘Engagierte Stadt’ and ‘Demokratie leben’ (Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth); and ‘Vielfalt als Chance’ (Ministry for Economic Affairs, Labour and Energy Brandenburg), in which three towns from our sample took part (1-E, 1-P, 3-B).
8. This means that the person is allowed to stay in Germany until a legal decision has been made. This situation can last for years and sometimes also applies to children born in Germany.
9. In September 2015, the refugee Modas Anamani took a selfie with Chancellor Angela Merkel, not knowing who she was. Shortly before Merkel said ‘we can do this’ about the migration crisis, a sentence that had been repeated over and over again to mock official policies and to express criticism about Merkel’s decision to accept 1 million refugees.

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