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# Migrant Political Participation in Small Towns. The Case of Bebra

*Kerstin Schenkel (University of Applied Science Erfurt),  
Sven Messerschmidt (University of Applied Science Erfurt),  
Johannes Glöckner (University of Applied Science Erfurt),  
Katrin Großmann (University of Applied Science Erfurt)*

## ABSTRACT

While migrant political participation in urban areas has seen extensive research, limited attention has been given to the unique context of small towns. This article provides an analysis of the factors that influence migrant political engagement in such settings. Our focus is on the small German town of Bebra, which has been shaped over decades by a migrant influx. It is situated in the federal state of Hesse, which is considered a pioneer for migrant participation in Germany. The research summarises institutional, socio-economic and discursive dynamics that shape political participation. It explores the roles of social networks, migrant self-organizations (MSO), and local governance structures in facilitating and constraining migrant access to political processes. The findings highlight particular challenges for small- and medium sized towns (SMT) in this regard, which include a lack of resources, a high degree of political and administrative embeddedness, and a low level of strategic orientation. The article concludes

with recommendations for the promotion of political participation as well as suggestions for future research.

## Introduction

As part of the international research project PISTE , which aims to improve the political participation opportunities of migrants in small and medium-sized towns, we have been cooperating with the Hessian municipality of Bebra and its mayor for around a year. Our goals are to strengthen the political participation of people with a migration history in the evaluation, design, and transformation of their city and, more generally, to enhance local integration policy and political participation in European small and medium-sized towns. We aim to fill the attention gap that affects both small city research and planning in general and the issue of political participation in particular. To this end, we conducted two qualitative empirical sub-studies on local networks and integration practices in Bebra. The small town of Bebra has a long history of international immigration comparable to big cities in its dynamics but also subject to specific small-town logics.

Following a brief outline of our conceptual framework, we present key findings from our case study in Bebra focussing on institutional and structural conditions for political participation, formative discourses, as well as the role of local (key) actors, social networks and integration policies.

## Conceptual approach

The analysis of political participation requires a pluralistic approach that synthesizes different factors. It should include both top-down and bottom-up perspectives and look at structural as well as dis-

cursive and action-related aspects. Geographical factors and historical trajectories should be incorporated, and this includes immigration stories and economic developments as well as the development of political institutions and governance traditions (Gesemann, Roth 2018).

In recent decades, migration research has identified features that influence migrant integration and participation: we now know about the need to change institutional frameworks and the influence of structural conditions as well as the influence of different actors on local and regional policies and discourses. These features can influence institutional norms and rules as well as their application. In addition, extensive research on small towns in recent years has identified specific conditions that shape migration and integration policies in SMTs (Damm 2019; Enßle-Reinhardt et al. 2023; Enßle-Reinhardt et al. 2022; Kühn, Münch 2019; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2019; Hanhörster et al. 2011).

Municipalities operate in a multi-level system (Kühn, Münch 2019; Scholten, Penninx 2016; Caponio, Pettrachin 2022), and the degree of their legal discretion—granted by the higher levels through the decentralization of tasks to the local level—plays an important role in the potential to shape integration and participation. When it comes to the local level, centralization is likely to produce inactivity and decentralization of certain tasks to the local level, granted by the higher levels, instead produces activity at the local level (Schamann et al 2021). Towns belonging to a district tend to have less scope for action than independent cities do.

Nevertheless, the effect of the institutional framework depends on how proactive the local actors are, the basic attitudes of the coalitions that have formed, and the positions of individuals and MSOs. Some studies have viewed this from the perspective of conflict negotiation (Budnik et al. 2020) or the influence of local party politics (Martínez-Ariño et al. 2019; Hepburn 2014). Others have analyzed the role of individual (Dahlvik 2017) or collective actors (Schenkel 2007). Actor- and structure-linking aspects were described by regime the-

ories (Stoker 1993) and governance-theoretical approaches (Blömer 2010). Recently, Schamann and others were able to show that a higher level of cooperation between mayors and administrations as well as between key actors, civil society and migrants strengthens integration policy activity (Schamann *et al.* 2021).

Structural conditions are also relevant to the design of migration policy activities. These include, on the one hand, the respective history of urbanization and urbanity in the sense of an openness to the world and to change, as well as social, cultural, educational and socio-economic factors and the number of inhabitants. On the other hand, municipal resources in terms of finance, personnel and expertise are important (Dörrenbächer 2018). In addition, the size and composition of the migrant population, local historical experiences with migration as well as current migration events and shrinkage contexts also matter (Schamann *et al.* 2021). Social proximity seems to play a recurring role in rural areas as well, although it is evaluated differently. Schamann and others highlight “..a pressure to adapt due to social proximity, which leads to inactivity (Schamann *et al.* 2021). Schenkel and others, in turn, point out two possible results that proximity and the high degree of organization in small communities can cause: inactivity and exclusionary attitudes on the one hand, and active integration on the other (Schenkel *et al.* 2022).

However, none of these aspects works on its own, and they often only gain significance in the context of powerful narratives. Thus, immigration is sometimes seen as playing an important role in maintaining the function of a municipality that would otherwise face existential hardship under conditions of shrinkage. However, discourses can also act as amplifiers of local problem perceptions and conflicts (Budnik *et al.* 2020; Boswell, Hampshire 2017) and might be used in an interest-driven manner that can influence stakeholders. They also differ considerably between cities (Schamann *et al.* 2021), where opposed strands of discourse can exist in parallel. Finally, discourses can concern notions of belonging, exclusion or demarcation within urban society (Budnik *et al.* 2020; Barbehön, Münch 2016).

## The case of Bebra in consideration of small-town features

### **Institutional framework for political participation**

Migrant political participation in Bebra has been shaped by multi-level governance. In Germany, the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community (BMI) regulates integration and migration issues at the national level, and the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) is responsible for implementing national integration policies. In order to realize the objectives for migrant political participation described in the national Immigration Act, the federal states (Länder) have drawn up integration concepts and guidelines as well as legal frameworks to enable the implementation of integration policies at the local level.

In the case of Bebra, it's a municipality subordinated to the district of Hersfeld-Rotenburg. Migrant political participation is regulated by the Hessian County Code (HKO) and the Hessian Municipal Code (HGO) for the Federal State of Hesse. According to these codes, municipalities in Hesse have been free since 2020 to decide whether to establish a foreigners' advisory body (FAB) or an integration commission (IC). Both formats have an advisory function and possess the right to make suggestions to the city council, but they differ in their legitimacy and composition. In Bebra, an IC was successfully constituted in 2021 but still has a low level of participation. This is certainly due in part to its lack of a clearly defined mandate, objectives and rights of the board on the part of the HGO, as well as generally insufficient training on political culture and institutions.

A crucial prerequisite for political participation are policies that support social integration at the local level. In Germany, these

policies occur at different levels of political decision-making. Consequently, the district office is responsible for central state tasks like social integration support (e.g. language and integration courses) and regulating access to state benefits while the provisioning of financial support for integration and migration counselling is a responsibility shared by the municipality and the district. This centralization leads to higher dependency and less autonomy for small towns like Bebra. Finally, the municipal administration can influence structural and social participation opportunities for immigrants at the local level, especially in the fields of urban development, housing, economic policy and education.

Centralization and dependency lead to a limited scope of action in the field of integration policies, but they can also provoke local activity if solutions from higher levels are absent (Schammann et al. 2021). In Bebra, an initiative by local stakeholders to elaborate integration guidance and establish rules of procedure for the integration commission can be seen as an example of such proactive action at the local level. This guidance will not compensate for an absent local integration plan at the district level (for example), but it might provide political and strategic guidance for integration policies in Bebra.

## **Structural conditions**

Bebra's "degree of urbanization" is classified as "town and suburb" (Eurostat 2022). Almost 14,000 people (Eurostat 2022) from over 80 nations live in Bebra. More than half of the inhabitants have a migration history, of which 15.4% (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2023) do not have German citizenship. In contrast with the district as a whole, Bebra's population development is slightly positive, as the negative natural population development is compensated for by a positive immigration balance (Bertelsmann Stiftung 2023), counteracting former population decline in Bebra.

As a once-important industrial location, the town has experienced labour migration since the mid-nineteenth century. Due to economic developments in the 1980s, work-related immigration to Bebra became less significant while since the 2000s an influx of refugees from different parts of the world has continued. As a result of this shift, the core city, which had in the past decade been inhabited by established migrant workers and their families, became the place of residence for primarily low-income immigrants. Established migrants followed the German population to the village-districts close by in a process of suburbanisation of the young and affluent. This has led to the socio-spatial segregation of Bebra's inhabitants into a predominantly migrant core, in which approximately 22% do not have a German passport, and the surrounding eleven village-districts, which are mainly inhabited by long-established residents and of which only 8% are not German citizens (Kindler 2023). In recent years, the local government has implemented urban redevelopment measures to meet this spatial disparity. The upgrading of the city centre promoted the re-identification of Bebra's inhabitants with their core city. However, the socio-spatial segregation remains, and it has consequences for the political representation of migrants.

Due to local electoral laws, the surrounding districts are over-represented politically since they can elect more representatives than the core city is able to. Although only one third of Bebra's inhabitants live in the village-districts, they are represented by two thirds of city parliamentarians. Therefore, migrant political participation is limited, since they do not receive an adequate number of representatives simply due to their places of residence. This also demonstrates the intersection of socio-economic factors and political participation. With regard to the socio-economic aspect, second-generation labour migrants in Bebra have been especially well integrated into the labour market, and large numbers of immigrants have succeeded in moving up into the middle or even the upper class. As a result, ethnic segregation has become less important than socio-economic segregation.



Bebra's long history of immigration favoured the emergence of structures that promote migrant integration and participation, including social networks, numerous migrant self-organizations, municipal institutions and public support services. However, our research has also identified barriers, such as the lack of safe places and formats in which particularly marginalized or multiply disadvantaged people (e.g. women) can express their needs and become involved.

Today's general open-mindedness toward migration in Bebra can therefore be strongly attributed to its historical experience with immigration, its diverse resident structure, the slowing effect that immigration has on natural shrinkage processes, as well as the image-enhancing upgrading of the town's core area.

## **Public migration discourse in Germany, Hesse and Bebra**

The development of public migration discourses in Germany has changed significantly in recent decades. During the reign of Chancellor Helmut Kohl (1983–1998), policies adhered to an integration concept that was referred to as “German Leitkultur” or “guiding culture” (Reinhardt 2021), a “[...] historical ethnocultural understanding of nationhood” (Habermas 2004 after Takle 2007). With the Red-Green government of 1998–2005, and later under Chancellor Angela Merkel (2005–2021), there was a shift toward an integration policy that recognized Germany as an immigration country. For the first time, it was publicly stated that migrants were not staying in Germany temporarily but had become residents. Since this time at the latest, there has been an ongoing debate in politics, academia, and the public sphere about the recognition of people with a “migration background” and the consequences for their participatory rights and opportunities (Reinhardt 2021). Since the beginning of the 2010s, the German debate has been increasingly influenced by the term post-migration, opening up space to demarcate the problematic and hierarchical aspects of the term migrant. The prefix post- also in-

cludes the recognition of migration as a constitutive component of the social structure, a given, a normalcy. Lines of conflicts that are being disguised as migration-related conflicts can then be decoded as social conflicts, gender inequalities, or racism (Foroutan 2018; Römhild 2015; Yildiz 2018).

These discourses are also echoed in discussions about the improvement of participation opportunities for migrants in the federal state of Hesse. Recently, this led to Hesse's renewed municipal legislation (see above). However, MSOs in particular criticize integration commissions as a step backward constituting a loss of electoral legitimacy. They criticize the integration commission's composition with 50% members delegated from the municipal council and the mayor's strong influence. On the other hand, small towns like Bebra have had rather negative experiences with foreigners' advisory boards due to low rates of election participation, the fact that the boards did not lead to sufficient migrant representation in the municipality, and because they did not manage to represent the interests of all migrant communities (Schenkel et al. 2023).

Examining Bebra, we can see a change in the public perception of migration over the years. Bebra has been labelled as a "Turkish town" since the 1970s due to its high proportion of foreigners. After the political change in 1990, many jobs were lost and a pessimistic mood dominated. Suddenly, migrants were perceived as competitors rather than colleagues. Bad news strengthened anti-migrant sentiment, and many natives held a negative perception of the newcomers. Today, a different narrative is being spread, labelling Bebra as a multicultural role model that benefits from its immigrants. Many small shops and associations in the town are now run by migrants and fulfil social responsibilities. The residential area "Göttinger Bogen", once stigmatized as being dominated by the "Turkish", is now considered a and "multicultural and vibrant" neighbourhood, at least by some. Moreover, the view of social problems seems to have changed as well. Families with a migration background are no longer considered "problem cases" while today it's the socially deprived

residents of German origin who are perceived as such (Municipality of Bebra 2018). Although this image of Bebra must be viewed critically, it nevertheless shows a change in opinions.

## **Local (key) actors, (in)formal networks and migrant stakeholders**

We analyzed the local networks in Bebra that address migrant integration in general and migrant political participation in particular. Due to the limited number of local stakeholders in the small-town context, these two subjects often overlap in terms of staff. The network structures primarily provide a variety of support and services for social and cultural participation, which we see as a precondition for political participation (Schenkel *et al.* 2023). Only a few actors are concerned with promoting political participation overtly, for which there seems to be little awareness in Bebra. The local network is characterized by the interplay of formal and informal structures and a small number of key figures and groups. Unquestionably, the network's key person is the head of the Department of Social Affairs. He has established connections to almost all migrant communities, has considerable influence on the work of local MSOs. He is himself part of the administration, and, typical of a small town, has a direct line to the mayor. He is also the person who repeatedly calls for awareness of migration- and integration-related issues in administration and local politics.

When it comes to formal bodies, the central decision-making positions in Bebra are held by the mayor (who is of German origin), the political and administrative bodies—the magistrate and the city council—and the political parties. Migrant interests are poorly represented since the parties are dominated by local German communities. Since 2021, the IC has provided a formal body for greater representation of migrant interests (see above). It is composed of the mayor (endowing him with the power to define the extent to which migrant interests are heard), three councillors (including one woman and one migrant), and ten residents, most of whom have a migrant

background and come from different ethnic groups. Many of the less-organized ethnic groups in Bebra are not represented, however.

The informal structures are represented by the three large MSOs resp. their representatives, the Turkish Mosque, the Syrian Orthodox Church and the multicultural football club Real Espanol. The activities of these MSOs focus primarily on providing practical support for their own communities. In the process of professionalising and establishing themselves in the city, however, they have come to increasingly work outwardly, with stronger connections, acting as a voice for their members in society. By contrast, communities that are organized less formally or not at all, such as refugees, are poorly represented if at all. The needs of marginalized groups such as women, people of colour, young people, the elderly and the educationally disadvantaged are also not represented.

The case of Bebra demonstrates once again that greater co-operation strengthens integration policy activities (Schamann *et al.* 2021). This affects all observed stakeholders and was visible due to the activities that were initiated within our project period.

## **Migrant political participation in Bebra**

In Germany, foreigners have limited voting rights and limited rights to be elected. This entails that migrants both with and without German citizenship are not proportionally represented in formal political bodies (Roth 2018), which is also the case in Bebra (see above). The structural lack of opportunities for civic co-determination, language barriers, and the influence of other political cultures make access even more difficult. Municipalities, including Bebra, are increasingly trying to enhance the political participation of their citizens through informal means. At the same time, MSOs are professionalising their structures to better identify the needs of their communities and address these needs to policymakers through formal and informal channels. By organising their members, MSOs also

partially reach groups that are marginalized and remain underrepresented, and they can provide the groups with a voice.

We can identify two types of participatory activities initiated by the municipality: 1) Activities required by the legal system, including the IC, which has the right to present the city council with proposals for decisions (this right has not yet been exercised in Bebra). 2) Voluntary activities, which are divided into formal occasion-related activities and informal citizen participation processes. In formal occasion-related activities, the municipality invites the different stakeholders involved in a given process, such as road construction, to voice their concerns. Even though these meetings have no decision-making capacity, MSOs in Bebra are routinely invited. Migrant stakeholders are also invited by the city to informal citizen participation events like neighbourhood walks and workshops. Such voluntary formats are becoming more common in Germany, but their results do not bind the municipality. A self-created participation instrument in Bebra is the neighbourhood management advisory board for the northwest city centre, made up of equal numbers of migrants and non-migrants.

In sum, Bebra's MSOs tend to implement their political participation through informal, rather than formal, channels. The MSOs organize themselves into subgroups like women's groups and a youth parliament, enabling their members to participate more actively in the organization. They also initiate informal political engagement by organising casual discussion evenings with political and administrative representatives. Finally, migrant stakeholders contact political and administrative decision-makers through informal means. However, these communication channels are strongly related to socio-economic status, social capital, the goodwill of the decision-makers, and other individual factors.

## Conclusion

In reference to the small towns examined in the PISTE project (Schenkel et al. 2023), specific characteristics responsible for the lack of migrant representation in the political process can be described for SMTs: Especially small towns that belong to administrative districts or counties, have difficulties to provide basic support for integration, which are a prerequisite for migrant civic and political participation. These provisions include language courses and legal status clarifications, as well as housing, employment and socio-cultural spaces. The non-fulfilment of these needs must be seen as a major obstacle. Small towns have also long been affected by limited municipal resources, which fundamentally impede strategic action through a lack of administrative capacity. This is especially true for areas where procedures are only now developing, such as migrant political participation. Instead, these activities rest on only a few shoulders due to the limited ability to divide labour in small towns. Since integration work is also based on relationships and has a high degree of informality, a rise in dependencies results. Often, one bridge-building actor provides impulses for integrative processes and takes on overlapping roles in both civil society and the administration.

Even if not all small towns are affected to the same extent, a strong sense of belonging to the autochthonous society leads to social control and—according to the self-assessment of migrants in Bebra—to self-censorship, making it difficult for one to take an active role in addressing contradictions and demands. On the other hand, the increasing demand for labour in SMTs, which suffer from population decline, has led to increasing legitimacy and acceptance for migrants. This, in turn, makes it easier for migrants to become politically active.

## **Extend political participation in small- and medium-sized towns**

In order to strengthen migrant political participation in SMTs, legal changes and political measures are required at all levels of governance. At the national level, the conditions for naturalization and the obtainment of dual citizenship should be facilitated in order to provide access to political co-determination for those with a migration history. In addition, financial support programmes—for small towns especially—should assist voluntary social and political work that provides migrants and other groups likely to live in precarious conditions with the resources (in terms of time and financial support) to participate socially and politically. The case of Bebra shows that the rights and objectives of ICs should be substantiated and their mandate defined at the federal state level in order to increase their political commitment and improve their attractiveness for participation. This goes along with the necessity of political education programmes supported by federal states and districts with competence in the education sector.

The example of Bebra shows that for SMTs, greater integration of immigrants into the municipal parties is necessary. This could be realized through a quota system, for example. Local electoral laws that restrict the political participation of migrants, as in our example, should be critically reviewed with regard to the selection of mandates. To this end, SMTs also need arenas for conflict negotiation and local conflict management. Informal formats should be used more frequently in order to complement formal instruments.

## **A call for more intersectionally oriented research**

The case of Bebra has shown that migrants are still limited in their opportunities for political participation. Nevertheless, it has also become clear that ethnic segregation is becoming less impor-

tant than social segregation and that discourses have shifted to a post-migration perspective. For the explanation of social inequalities, aspects such as income, integration into social networks, lifestyles, and gender are playing an increasing role alongside factors such as origin, cultural background, and religious orientation. This effect will increase given that the proportion of people with a migration history will continue to rise in the future. A person's migration history will continue to lose importance as a category of distinction and explanatory factor for social inequalities. Future research should therefore adopt intersectional perspectives and focus on the various overlapping and reinforcing moments of exclusion. An intersectional approach might help to uncover the complex power dynamics and inequalities that migrants—and other marginalized groups—face in their political participation. It would acknowledge that migrants experience political engagement within systems of oppression and privilege. It might also assist in seeing migrants not as a homogeneous group but instead as individuals with unique identities and experiences that shape their possibilities. Finally, intersectional analysis is necessary for the development of inclusive and effective policies and interventions that address the specific needs and challenges faced by different social groups, leading to more equitable and just political systems.



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