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Research interests: reception and integration of refugees, migration to Eastern Germany, organizations of immigrants and their impact on integration

Organising Refugee Policies: Issues at Local Level in Germany

The German federal system for the reception of refugees involves three different levels: The federal government is responsible for the principal decision to accept refugees and the national legislation. The 16 states (Länder) take care for first accommodation, first medical care, basic supply, and the implementation of federal law. Local governments are responsible for the subsequent accommodation, social and medical care, they provide schools and kindergartens, implement the residence, asylum and social benefits laws, and the repatriation of rejected asylum seekers. During the asylum procedure as well as in case of rejected asylum seekers, the Länder as well as local governments have the main financial burden, while accepted refugees enjoy benefits for the unemployed and needy at the same level as all citizens, covered mainly by the federal government.

The number of refugees increased already since 2008. Since 2010 the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) could not cope with the mounting numbers of refugees, and decision took longer and longer. When the numbers increased tremendously in 2015, this situation got worse, and when the federal government decided in September 2015 to open the German borders, it collapsed. More than 500,000 asylum seekers in 2015 could not apply for asylum, many more were not even registered and identified. While the Federal Office (BAMF) could not manage the flow of applications and refugees had to wait for a decision about their application for many months or even years, the Länder, local governments and many volunteers worked hard and successful to house and feed the refugees. To make up for the deficits and to demonstrate activity, the federal government produced a multitude of laws and regulations in 2015/16. It was a mix of easing of restrictions, new restrictions, less and

more benefits and many more changes. Some of the changes were revisions of revisions some months before. The legal system became more complex, and states and local governments, overburdened with the incoming refugees, had to adjust to all the changes. All in all, the surprising and unannounced arrival of 900,000 refugees in 2015 alone was handled well by Länder and communities, together with many volunteers, despite the collapse of the federal system.

The decision of the federal government led to high financial burdens for the Länder and local governments. Local governments had also to deal with lack of housing, difficulties to find enough places in schools and kindergartens, to integrate families into the neighborhood, to ensure a functioning medical system, and find jobs for those able to work. They had to deal with a lack of language courses and a lack of professional social workers, educators, or teachers. Additionally, the newly introduced differentiation between the "good" and the "bad" refugees, those from states with a high chance for being acknowledged as refugees (in 2016 and 2017, those from Syria, Iran, Irak, Somalia and Eritrea) on the one side and all the others with a worse perspective on the other side, led to conflicts at the local level. All refugees were living in the same accommodations, went to the same advisory centers or social services, and sometimes to the same language courses. But the entitlements were very different, which was hard to explain to the care takers or volunteers dealing with them and created frustration between those who tried their best to help. Additionally, the federal government started already in autumn 2015 to push Länder as well as local governments to repatriate as much refugees as possible, if they did not belong to the "good" refugees, no matter what the individual social situation might have been,.

During the whole process, support from civil society was overwhelming. Citizens volunteered over the whole country, from the crisis up to today, and still even when the public opinion became more difficult and right wing groups were beginning to protest against welcoming of refugees. Bendel speaks about an „Explosion of Volunteering" (Bendel et al, 2016), and Ahrens showed in her study, that this volunteering did not decrease and is still high (Ahrens, 2017). Without this support from volunteers the reception of all the refugees would not have been possible. However, there were also some problems. Many volunteers had no support and training, and sufficient coordination or supervision were lacking.

Nevertheless, most local governments successfully coordinated and still coordinate these activities as well as housing, schooling, and taking care of the refugees with high engagement and a lot of creative solutions. But there is a wide range of handling it. Local governments have a lot of options how to handle the situation, even some of them are not aware of there space for autonomous decisions. Schammann and Kühn see the communities as "hybrid identities" and state: " Local governments are mostly seen as the weakest link in the chain of federal refugee politics. They are seen as a level with minimal room for own decisions, restricted to implementing what the EU, the federal government and the Länder have decided. This is clearly a wrong perception." And they continue: "This is due to numerous contradictory directives and vague legal concepts leading to unsolved conflicts on federal and state levels. Communities have – and are allowed – to transform the ambiguous legal norms into clear administrative actions. As a result they are autonomous policy makers." (Schammann und Kühn, 2016, 4)

At least four different lines of ambivalencies on the local government level can be observed, giving space for autonomous decisions:

- between local and federal/ Länder level regarding the implementation of residence and asylum laws, repatriation policies, e.g. , and the use of administrative discretions
- between duty tasks bound by federal and Länder directions (realization of legislation, number of refugees to be accommodated, e.g.) and matters of self-government (e.g. quality of accommodation, social care, education, language support, voluntary help...)
- between law and order and integration policies,
- between logics of administration and civic engagement.

According to the way local governments decide on these lines, we can see a wide range of local policies, meaning that chances for integration differ widely from town to town (Bendel, 2016).

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