

Local Migration Regimes in Rural Areas: The Example of Refugee Reception in Saxony, Germany*

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Abstract: The reception of asylum seekers has challenged municipalities and their populations across Europe in recent years: Many rural villages and small and mid-sized towns had little prior experience with large numbers of asylum seekers. The housing of refugees constitutes one of the most controversial arenas and challenges for local communities within the reception process.

This paper sheds light on rural case studies using the perspective of migration regimes. Local Migration Regimes constitute arenas of migration-related processes including actors, practices, and negotiations at different scales. The analysis covers four rural municipalities (two villages, two towns) from two Saxonian counties in Germany. All cases have different strategies for accommodating migrants but all can be seen as post-socialist immigration societies. The findings show that the issue of reception and housing is seen as a recurrent and contested local field of conflict and cooperation in the rural case sites. The regime lens highlights the strong dependencies but also fragmentation between different levels (national, regional, and supra-local). Housing practices and strategies for refugees reflect local discourses and contribute to the social and spatial production of migration. I argue, that the regime lens contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of local settings, acknowledges spatial and social structures but challenges empirical field work and data sets. This empirical research is based on qualitative interviews, media articles, and documents from rural counties in Germany and was conducted within the joint research project "Future for Refugees in Rural Regions of Germany".

Keywords: Local Migration Regime · Refugees · Rural regions · Local level · Saxony · Germany

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1 Introduction

As the numbers of asylum seekers increased tremendously, refugee reception during the “long summer of migration” in 2015 (*Hess et al.* 2017) challenged municipalities throughout Germany. In particular, this applied to localities which were not experienced in the accommodation of asylum seekers, such as rural villages and small and mid-sized towns. Today, many of these localities receive refugees, whereas asylum had previously not been a prominent local issue. Moreover, most rural regions in Germany also have a lower level of diversity and fewer long-standing traditions surrounding arrival infrastructures (*Aumüller/Gesemann* 2016; *Rösch et al.* 2020). This is particularly true for rural municipalities in eastern Germany which are the geographical focus of this paper. Public discourses on how to manage the reception challenge of 2015/2016 referred to possible advantages of rural regions for refugee reception and integration: For example, housing vacancies or a higher level of social engagement than in urban agglomerations, which could offer easy entry points for inclusion of refugees. Discourses also highlighted potential benefits for rural localities accommodating refugees such as demographic rejuvenation or positive effects for the local labor market (e.g. *Franke/Magel* 2016). However, this optimistic description of a “win-win situation” neglected the complexity of immigrant inclusion in terms of local societal processes. In academic contributions, this supposed “rural idyll” is also reflected in a more critical way (e.g., *Arora-Jonsson* 2017).

The issue of accommodation and housing undoubtedly constitutes one of the most controversial issues in the local reception of refugees. First of all it, triggers very practical questions regarding residential facilities, local infrastructure and capacities, but also questions of local political governance and civil society involvement, and it finally lays bare societal negotiation processes of localities on spatial issues. Factors shaping local reception processes include the socio-economic situation, societal structures, local actors, and multi-level decision-making such as the impact of national policies (see also *Glorius et al.* 2019). These local characteristics have sparked the interest of migration scholars in recent years, aiming to go beyond national frameworks which formerly constituted the main scientific level of observation (*Glick Schiller/Çağlar* 2009). One promising concept for understanding but also disentangling the complexity of local settings is the Local Migration Regimes approach, which focuses on the analysis of structures and power formations in certain local contexts concerning migration issues (*Schmiz/Räuchle* 2019). The Local Migration Regimes perspective opens the view on local processes without ignoring legal and political implications of spatial levels.

This paper uses the regime perspective to implement a comparative analysis of local reception situations in four distinct rural localities in the state of Saxony. Focusing on the issue of reception and housing, and making use of a rich dataset consisting of documents, expert interviews and media articles, this paper explores the ways in which the reception of migrants is negotiated and constructed at the local level. Therefore, this paper provides insights into the spatial conditions and processes of spatial production in two districts, including four localities in the rural

areas of the federal state of Saxony in Germany. I argue that both the previous experience with migration and rural specifics such as socio demographics shape the local regime characteristics.

This paper is structured as follows. Section 2 explores the theoretical perspective of Local Migration Regimes as a way of observing contexts of migration. Section 3 introduces the data and methods. The contextual conditions for migrant reception for both districts are described in Section 4, and the empirical findings presented in Section 5. The findings are then further discussed through the lens of Local Migration Regimes in Section 6.

2 Theoretical perspectives: Local Turn and Local Migration Regimes

As a result of the emerging role in refugee reception and the ongoing push to move beyond the state as the central unit of analysis (“methodological nationalism”), migration scholars have recently turned to the Local as relevant level for political negotiation processes on immigration and immigrant inclusion, and thus for research on those processes (“local turn”) (*Glick Schiller/Çağlar 2009; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017*). This emerging research perspective has become even more prevalent as European cities have introduced their strategies and have become more involved in national reception policies addressing challenges to integration and diversity. Meanwhile there is a growing body of literature covering local migration policies and the role of localities within integration processes (e.g., *Martinello 2013; Garcés-Masareñas/Penninx 2016; Schammann et al. 2021; Zapata-Barrero et al. 2017*). Whereas previous comparative research paid particular attention to policies and local government and governance (*Borkert/Caponio 2010; Martinello 2013; Scholten 2013*), findings from recent comparative case studies increasingly highlight the importance of local contexts beyond the policy level such as local discourses, regional socio-economic situations, the local population, and other geographical implications (*Doomernik/Glorius 2016; Glorius et al. 2019; Meer et al. 2021; Schammann et al. 2021; Walker 2014*). As local specifics receive more attention, there is also growing interest in rural municipalities as case study sites (*Cabral/Swerts 2021; Haselbacher/Segarra 2022; Woods 2018*), as well as on urban agglomeration without a long-standing immigration history. In Germany, this notably applies to East German cities with a post-socialist history (*Dunkl et al. 2019; El Kayed et al. 2020; Wiest 2020*). Considering those developments described above, the concept of migration regimes has found its way into the locality debate (“Local Migration Regimes”): It aims to capture the complexity of overlapping societal and political settings for migration while also acknowledging spatialities (see *Rass/Wolff 2018*). In contrast to policy-oriented frameworks or development studies, the regime perspective introduces a more interdisciplinary view on migration and, different from governance analysis, approaches “the local” from different angles (e.g., actors, discourses, spatial conditions).

Most prominently, the term “regime” was introduced in political science in the late 1970s to describe regulative structures in normative systems of international

relations (Keohane 1984; Krasner 1983). The underlying assumption is that states do not only act in a rational or egoistical manner, but also focus on cooperative mechanisms. The core idea of this definition remains central to different notions of regimes today: Regimes are “defined as principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actor expectations converge in a given issue-area” (Krasner 1983: 1). Regimes affect ways of interacting (“regimes do matter”, Krasner 1983: 6) and are prolonged modes of interaction, although they can be shorter-term. In contrast to ad hoc agreements, regimes set the standards across such agreements and do not change in a short time frame. The term “regime” is widely used in migration studies and its meaning differs, e.g., “European Migration Regime”, “Asylum Regime”, “Border Regime” or “Mobility Regime”. Most of these meanings share a focus on power formation between (non-)state actors, inclusionary/exclusionary practices, and challenge state-centric approaches or normative governance frameworks.

In recent years, migration scholars have suggested a broadened heuristic perspective on “Migration Regimes” and “Local Migration Regimes” (e.g., Bernt 2019; Hinger/Schäfer 2019; Pott 2018; Oltmer 2018; Rass/Wolff 2018; Schmiz/Räuchle 2019). While most of these contributions focus on conceptual thoughts there are few empirical contributions using the term Local Migration Regime (Hinger/Schäfer 2019; Cabral/Swerts 2021). The lens of Local Migration Regime emphasizes spatial structures and conditions for political and societal processes of negotiation on migration processes within a certain local context. Therefore, the idea of migration regimes considers the complexity of migration processes, challenges the state-centric research focus, and addresses the “scalar shift in migration studies” (Schmiz/Räuchle 2019: 3). Contributions on Local Migration Regimes highlight the interaction of state and non-state actors, local migration history, positioning processes, discourses, and migrant representation (Schmiz/Räuchle 2019): For example, how do certain actor constellations deal with migration-related issues; what role is taken by civil society and migrants? How can different practices and discourses about migration be linked to historical developments? And are spatial and bordering practices shaped by local or other levels? Overall, the approach of Local Migration Regimes adopts a social constructivist perspective, focusing on certain entities as spatial-temporal and social ordering structures and the corresponding production of migration: The main foci of most of the contributions, based on the basic idea of the regime theory, are the power formation and principles of collective processes (“conflict and cooperation”, Oltmer 2018: 4). These collective processes constitute “zones of negotiation” (Pott/Tsianons 2014) or “arenas” (Oltmer 2018) in which migration is negotiated.

Despite the increased number of conceptual publications on migration regimes in recent years, there is still no universal definition or framework as the concept is undertheorized (Bernt 2019: 10-12). This is certainly due to missing empirical embeddedness of the concept. The lack of empirical application might be caused by the fuzziness and variation of meanings of regime analysis. Therefore, Rass and Wolff propose a multi-layered and methods-based approach, arguing for “more empirically saturated current [...] regime research” (Rass/Wolff 2018:

44). They propose approaching migration regimes “not as a detectable entity or institution ‘out there’, but rather as a model to describe and understand a complex and decentralized power formation” (*Rass/Wolff* 2018: 44). In this sense, I use the perspective of regimes as a methodological viewpoint for reconstructing local settings with empirical evidence (see also Section 3). For this, I refer, based on *Oltmer* (2018: 6), to the Local Migration Regime as a local field of actions focusing on certain migration-related issues. It represents a local arena of negotiation and processes of cooperation and conflict driven by migrants, as well as (local) non-state and state actors. Furthermore, each local regime is shaped by its own political norms and spatial conditions. Local Migration Regimes serve as a spatial context for migration but also include spatial productions¹ (see also *Pott* 2018: 121-122).

In this paper, I focus on rural places which have been of increasing interest to migration scholars for several years. In their study of rural settings of Local Migration Regimes in Portugal, *Cabral and Swerts* (2021: 192) show that the pressuring role of non-state actors is not as decisive as in urban settings (e.g., *Hinger et al.* 2016). Drawing on this, I expect the non-urban environment to offer new insights on the characteristics of rural migration regimes, their actor constellations, and spatial features.

This paper draws therefore on three core elements of Local Migration Regimes: (1) Actors and power constellations in migration-related issues, (2) local discourses, narratives, and migration history, and (3) spatial structures and levels (e.g., regional, national) impacting the local field of action.

For greater conceptual precision, I focus on one issue-area as a starting point for the empirical analysis. I examine the issue of reception and housing of refugees, since it is both a central field of action for municipalities, as has been shown in comparative studies, and an integral part of local debates, conflicts, and spatial production (e.g., *Alexander* 2007; *Kreichauf* 2018; *Meer et al.* 2021). Also, as *Meer et al.* state, the area of housing shows “where the national state is relying on third sector partnerships” (*Meer et al.* 2021: 2). *Hinger and Schäfer* (2019) identified cities’ migration history and scalar positioning as relevant features in their comparative analysis of two German cities. Furthermore, their findings clearly show that implicit structures in urban societies are linked to accommodation practices. For Leipzig, a city in Saxony, they highlight the importance of “the presence of right-wing groups and xenophobic sentiments” (*Hinger/Schäfer* 2019: 73). This impacts the way how migration is dealt with in a broader sense. Referring to the accommodation situation, the authors found, for example, more hostility toward reception facilities accommodations than in the other comparative case of Osnabrück (*Hinger/Schäfer* 2019: 6). Referring to this previous research, I expect that the area of housing and accommodation is a useful starting point for identifying constellations and spatial productions while limiting the broad approach of migration regimes analysis to a particular issue.

¹ The concept of “Production of Space” was introduced by *Henri Lefebvre* (1991). He stated that social relations and social settings also structure physical spaces. In society, there is a dialectic of space and social relations.

3 Methods and Data

The empirical data was collected in two rural counties (“Landkreise“, NUTS 3 level) in the federal state of Saxony in Germany. I selected the two cases from the data set of a comparative joint project (“Future for Refugees in Rural Areas of Germany“) conducted in four *Länder* with overall eight counties and 32 municipalities (“Gemeinden“, LAU level). According to *Küpper’s* (2016) typology, all eight counties are either rural or very rural. For following analysis, I have chosen to focus on two counties and four municipalities from the sample of Saxony. This selection and reduction of the cases made it possible to grasp the complexity of local regime cases by using a mixed set of data.

Because both counties are located in the State of Saxony, they are subject to the same federal and national regulations concerning refugee distribution. This makes it possible to consider the regional context more closely (e.g., demographic development and socio-economic situations) and at the same time to identify the local varieties within the negotiation of housing and reception of refugees. One medium-sized town and one rural village² were selected in each of the two counties (see Table 1). In line with *Küpper’s* (2016) typology acknowledging the diverse character of rurality in terms of sizes of municipalities, two different sizes were chosen (one rural village, and one rural town in both counties). Also, all chosen localities accommodate refugees,³ which is not the case in all municipalities in these counties. For reasons of research ethics, the names of the municipalities are not mentioned here because the interview data of interviewees must be pseudonymized.

To capture different aspects of migration regimes, this paper applies a multi-method approach. It uses the following methods and data:

- (i) 22 semi-structured interviews (see Table 2) with local experts conducted in 2019 and 2020 dealing with migration or integration constitute the main data for this paper; the analysis of the transcribed interviews was carried out in three steps using structured and inductive methods (based on *Strauss et al.* 1996) with MAXQDA: 1) a structured coding of interview segments containing any reference to *housing, local reception, or accommodation* 2) an inductive coding of all the identified segments, and 3) selective coding to find relations within the codes.
- (ii) The data collection also included newspaper articles covering local discourses. I searched two larger regional newspapers⁴ with local sections from 2009 to 2019 (keywords: “asylum“, and “migration“, each combined with the name

² In this paper, I am refer to the two rural municipalities as “villages“ since the findings only draw on field research in one part of each rural municipality.

³ I refer to the term “refugee“ as a general term for humanitarian migrants including different legal terms (e.g. asylum seekers, recognized refugees).

⁴ These are the *Leipziger Volkszeitung* for Nordsachsen and the *Sächsische Zeitung* for Bautzen.

Tab. 1: Overview of case studies

County	Bautzen (County I)	Nordsachsen (County II)
Rurality/Socio economics (Thünen typology)	Classified as "rural" with "less good socio-economic situation"	
	Village I	Village II
	Town I	Town II
	Population 1,600 administratively assigned to a rural municipality of 10 villages with 7,000 inhabitants	Population 1,100 administratively assigned to a rural municipality of 8 villages with 4,000 inhabitants
	Population 17,000 medium-sized town	Population 20,000 medium-sized town

Source: Statistical Office of the Free State of Saxony, 2009-2019, own calculation, based on *Küpper* 2016.

of the municipality). In total, I found 1789 articles, 623 of which addressed housing or municipal reception as a central issue. I summarized these articles in monthly memos for each local case. In addition to the qualitative interviews, the media covers a long-term period and provides information about the relevant topics discussed in public.

(iii) Further case memos for each locality were compiled while working on all additional material, interviews, and newspaper articles.

Tab. 2: Analyzed interview data

Type of expert	Bautzen	Nordsachsen	Total
Local politician	3	2	5
Administration/Public official	2	5	7
Civil society/volunteer	4	1	5
Civil society organization	3	2	5
Total	13	9	22

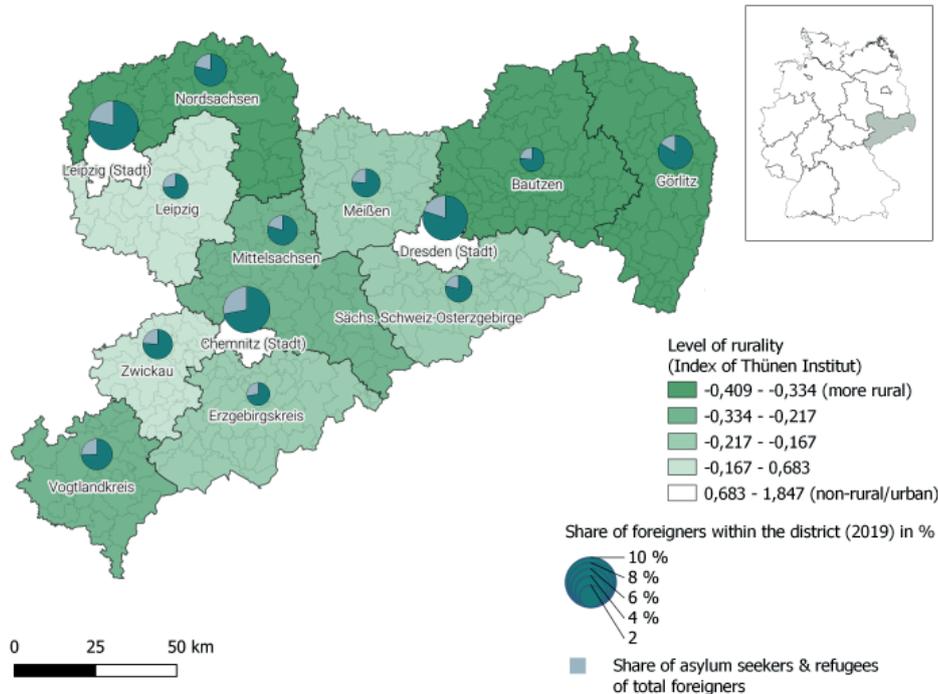
Source: own design

4 Refugee reception in the counties of Bautzen and Nordsachsen

This section introduces the regional context of the case studies, which is necessary to assess the local contexts for migrant reception, including public discourses and practices on migration. As highlighted above, the local scale cannot be seen separately from other levels such as the regional or national levels (*Rass/Wolff* 2018: 52). Furthermore, the rural conditions defining the spatial context should be addressed.

4.1 Rural regions and the reception of migrants in Saxony

The state of Saxony is located in eastern Germany and was a part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Saxony consists of 13 districts made up of 10 counties (166 towns and 250 rural municipalities) and 3 urban (see Fig. 1) districts (Chemnitz, Dresden, Leipzig). Each of these counties contains between 28 and 59 municipalities. Since the 1990s, the region has been shaped by a substantial transformation process in society, economics, and infrastructure (*Henn/Schäfer* 2020). Starting after reunification, the economic transformation led to an immense demographic decline due to outward migration of the working population and ageing processes. This applies in particular to rural regions in the state and to certain population groups, e.g., women. Since the early 2000s, the state's demographic decline has slowed down, especially in the three cities. The same trend can be observed with respect to the economic situation: The upward economic trend was followed by lower unemployment rates, and additional workforce was needed. However, the

Fig. 1: Rurality and foreigners in districts and counties of Saxony

Source: Thünen Index of Rurality/Küpper 2016, *Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) 2021* based on Central Register of Foreign Nationals, Geodata by GeoSN 2021, Staatsbetrieb Geobasisinformation und Vermessung Sachsen (GeoSN) 2021: Geodaten des Freistaates Sachsen [<https://www.govdata.de/dl-de/by-2-0>, 21.05.2021].

demographic decline can still be observed in rural regions, where the effects of return migration and international migration remain lower than in the urban districts (Leibert 2020: 200-204).

Population decline represents a continuous challenge in rural regions of Saxony and other rural parts of (East) Germany. There are ongoing debates on replacement migration via attracting Germans or international migrants as a solution to demographic decline (Nadler 2012). In the GDR, migration was mainly experienced as strictly regulated labor migration by contract workers from socialist partner countries, many of whom had to leave after the collapse of state socialism. After the reunification of Germany, emigration and immigration became more visible and increased significantly. In the early 1990s, large-scale migration flows from former GDR territory to West Germany began, so that urban and rural regions lost a significant share of population at working age. At the same time, international migrants arrived, such as ethnic German immigrants from Eastern Europe, or refugees, from the wars in former Yugoslavia. Additionally, Intra-EU-mobility increased, notably since the EU's eastern enlargement in 2004. However, this did not reverse the declining demographic situation in rural regions of East Germany. The

increased influx of refugees in the mid-2010s interrupted the negative population trend, though only for a short time (*Reibstein/Klingholz* 2020). The proportion of foreigners, therefore, remains at a lower level in Saxony than in other federal states. While the share of foreigners in Germany was 12.5 percent, it was only 5.1 percent in Saxony in 2019 (*BAMF* 2020). Table 3 shows that foreigners are a clear minority in Saxony, especially in the more rural counties. With rising numbers of asylum seekers around 2015, the proportion of foreigners increased in many municipalities (though not all received refugees) and in all counties.

As mentioned above, since 2014, the number of asylum seekers in Germany has increased significantly (2014: 173.072, 2015: 476.649, 2016: 745.545) (*BAMF* 2020) and remains at a higher level than before 2014 (2020: 122.170), much of which is attributable to asylum seekers.

The distribution, reception, and housing of asylum seekers in Germany is a highly fragmented task between the national, state, and local levels with mutual dependencies on all levels. This context is important for understanding the impact on the localities: While the registration and asylum procedure is carried out by the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (*BAMF*), the initial reception takes place at the state level. According to the distribution quota “Königsteiner Schlüssel”, the federal state of Saxony, with its 4 million inhabitants, receives around 5 percent of the national applicants. Asylum seekers are first allocated to Initial Reception

Tab. 3: Population and share of foreigners in Saxony by county/city district

County/District	Total population	Share of foreigners in%	
	2019	2011	2019
Bautzen	299,758	1.6	2.3
Erzgebirgskreis	334,948	1.1	2.1
Görlitz	252,725	2.2	4.6
Leipzig	258,139	1.4	2.5
Meißen	241,717	2.5	3.2
Mittelsachsen	304,099	1.6	3.5
Nordsachsen	197,741	1.9	4.1
Sächsische Schweiz-Osterzgebirge	245,586	1.7	2.9
Vogtlandkreis	225,997	1.5	3.8
Zwickau	315,002	1.6	3.5
City districts			
Chemnitz, Stadt	246,334	4.9	8.5
Dresden, Stadt	556,780	4.8	8.0
Leipzig, Stadt	593,145	6.0	9.7
Total	4,071,971	2.9	5.1

Source: *Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) 2020, Federal Statistical Office (Destatis) 2019* (based on Central Register of Foreign Nationals), *Statistical Office of the Free State of Saxony (StLA) 2011/2019*, own calculation.

Facilities of the State, where they stay during the first weeks in order to manage issues of identification, medical screening, and the preparation of the asylum application. After that, they are redistributed to the ten counties and three city districts within the State of Saxony, which have to accommodate them while their asylum application is processed (see Table 3). According to the distribution quota, 66.9 percent of refugees are sent to the (mainly rural) counties.⁵ There, asylum seekers are further redistributed to municipalities within the county, which have to provide accommodation and social support. Some counties pursue an even distribution among municipalities; others focus on centralized reception centers installed in a few municipalities. After asylum status determination, the “follow-up” housing takes place, in which refugees, in most cases, must move to private apartments. To prevent movements to cities with a higher share of migrants and reduce emigration from rural counties, Saxony introduced an obligation for residence (“Wohnsitzauflage”, based on national law) on the county level in 2018, meaning that refugees with a protection status must stay in the respective county for three years after status determination (*Renner* 2018: 4).

4.2 The perception of migrants in Saxony and the cases of Bautzen and Nordsachsen

In addition to the administrative side of the reception process, societal conditions and collective perception of migrants or refugees shape Local Migration Regimes. For the counties under examination, notably their characteristics as post-socialist spaces and rural peripheries come to the fore. *Weiss* concludes that the socio-spatial conditions in East Germany hinder the process of integration. She finds that there has not been a public discourse about migration as an integral part of society in the region (*Weiss* 2018: 135). Consequently, *Glorius* argues that the discursive framing of migration is closely linked to past and ongoing “[m]igration experiences [which] mainly consist of the huge internal outflow, which – due to its selectivity – left behind local populations with high levels of ageing, unemployment and other social problems” (*Glorius* 2017: 123). Outward migration after reunification, especially of women, is seen as another driver of deprivation.

Furthermore, there is an ongoing debate on the attitudinal specifics in the East German *Länder* concerning the collective experience of economic instability. Attitudinal studies of East Germany have found several obstacles for the integration of migrants. For example, *Salomo* concludes that the residential context in Thuringia (composition, level of immigration and homogeneity of population) indirectly increases the above-mentioned perception of deprivation and therefore fosters ethnocentric attitudes (*Salomo* 2019: 103) which are generally unsympathetic towards immigration. *Rees et al.*, building on intergroup contact theory and group-threat theory, found that lower rates of diversity are one of the specific local factors

⁵ The details of the distribution within the state are regulated according to the Saxonian Refugee Reception Act (“Sächsisches Flüchtlingsaufnahmegesetz”).

contributing to a “climate of hate” and right-wing attitudes (*Rees et al.* 2019: 9-10). This is also closely linked to high vote shares for right-wing parties such as the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland). In both counties, the AfD has achieved continuous, significant electoral success (2017 federal parliamentary elections: Bautzen 31.9 percent, Nordsachsen 27.2 percent; 2021 state parliamentary elections: Nordsachsen 27.8 percent, Bautzen 33.4 percent).

An attitudinal survey on rural populations’ attitudes conducted by the author (N = 904) in 2019 within the same project framework as the present study (“Future for refugees in Rural Areas of Germany”) supports these findings. The surveyed population in Saxony displayed the highest level of hostility against foreigners, while contact experiences with migrants were the lowest (*Schneider et al.* 2021: 43-44). These attitudes are also discussed in the context of rural areas (e.g., *Crawley et al.* 2019). *Czaika* and *Di Lillo* conclude: “People who attribute greater importance to living in safe and secure surroundings and having a domicile in rural areas are found to be associated with growing hostility towards further immigrant flows” (*Czaika/Di Lillo* 2018: 2468).

As in all regions of Germany, refugee reception in Saxony has shown a wide range of societal responses, including numerous welcoming initiatives, solidarity movements, and the engagement of various civil society actors, especially in 2014 and 2015. This went along with contention and protests against reception policies, including attacks against refugees (“The dark side of the German ‘welcome culture’”, *Jäckle* and *König* 2017). The share of foreigners within a local community has a “highly significant and expected negative effect on attacks on refugees” as *Jäckle* and *König* (2017: 26) show. Although such incidents and protests against reception centers for asylum seekers were not limited to rural communities or the region of Saxony, some incidents in rural towns in Saxony have become the focus of national news coverage and serve as nationwide symbols of “non-welcoming culture” (e.g., in Heidenau, Freital, Schneeberg; see *Aumüller et al.* 2015: 122). The protesters, often driven by right-wing initiatives, drew a picture of “refugees as security, economic, or even health threats” (*Koehler* 2018: 78). Within the two cases, counties, especially the county capital Bautzen, experienced a variety of protests and anti-refugee attacks. *Rees et al.* argue that the sociocultural climate is a key determinant of intergroup conflicts, conducting a qualitative case study on the “super-homogeneous context” of the town of Bautzen (*Rees et al.* 2022: 9). Both the welcoming culture and anti-immigrant protests clearly show the reception of refugees as a field of local struggles and contention.

5 Empirical findings in Bautzen and Nordsachsen

Across the four different municipality case studies, the housing issue illustrates different local strategies.⁶ These approaches are subject to negotiations within the localities and between municipalities and counties and are described in the following subsections (5.1-5.4).

Bautzen (County I)

Bautzen county is located in eastern Saxony and consists of 57 municipalities. It has a share of foreigners of 2.3 percent and hosted about 2,300 refugees in 2019. The authorities in the county of Bautzen follow a centralized accommodation strategy for asylum seekers: In 2019, at least two-thirds of the asylum seekers were accommodated in five collective accommodation centers based in three medium-sized towns and in one rural municipality, the largest with a capacity up to 500 asylum seekers. Most of the collective accommodation centers were set up in 2015. Since then, Village I has accommodated about 100 people in a collective accommodation center run by the county. The building used to be a school and is located at the outskirts of the village. Almost no refugees stay in the village after their refugee status is accepted. Town I has a somewhat longer history of refugee reception. Since 1992, the town has hosted asylum seekers by order of the county. In 2012, a collective center was installed as the central facility of Bautzen county, which provides up to 400 places. In 2015, around 700 refugees were accommodated in Town I. In 2019, it hosts around 350 asylum seekers (2019), about 250 of them in the collective center. Around 75 asylum seekers lived in private apartments provided by the municipal housing stock. After the approval of asylum, many refugees find apartments mostly in municipal housing, assisted by social workers or volunteers.

Nordsachsen (County II)

The county of Nordsachsen is located in northwestern Saxony. The share of foreigners (4.1 percent) is somewhat higher than in Bautzen and the county host about 2,100 refugees. In Nordsachsen, the reception of asylum seekers is organized in a more decentralized manner, as around 30 municipalities are involved in the accommodation of asylum seekers. However, ten municipalities also provide collective accommodations. Around three quarters of the asylum seekers are hosted in private apartments. The collective reception centers are significantly smaller (maximum capacity of 150). Village II has hosted asylum seekers in municipality apartments since 2015. In 2018, approximately 90 refugees (40 after recognition of asylum and 50 during their asylum procedure) lived in the village, which is not as peripheral as Village I, and close (10km) to a small town with basic infrastructure. In contrast, Town II had two collective accommodations (only one since 2020) and

⁶ The section refers mainly to the recent years in which numbers of asylum seekers increased (2014/2015). The empirical data was conducted in 2019/2020 but interviewees also referred to the recent past. Newspaper articles cover 2009-2019.

private apartments. Many of these apartments are located in a part of town with a higher proportion of migrants and socially precarious neighborhoods.

The following sections outline the central findings on the issue area of accommodation and housing found in the empirical analyses of both countries. The data analysis of the examined localities shows that the issues of housing and accommodation play a central role in the local negotiation of migration and was discussed more than other integration-related issues.

The data mainly covers the initial reception period and early stages of the local admission of refugees. This is because the long-term housing of refugees, e.g., in private flats, was not addressed in the data as much as expected. This became particularly clear in the media analysis using the keywords “asylum” and “migration” to find articles concerning the local debates. 623 out of 1789 newspaper articles address the topic of housing and reception facilities, so it is extensively covered in local media compared to other migration-related issues. Accommodation and housing were also a central focus points in the majority of the analyzed interviews on refugee integration.

The rising numbers of asylum seekers in 2014-2015 can be seen as a strong reference point (“before” and “after”), even though the refugee reception in Town I (Bautzen) and Town II (Nordsachsen) were already discussed early:

“I would like to start with 2015. Yes, in 2015 the first refugees came to [Town II] and then it became clear that we need accommodation facilities (...) Over the year, the number [of asylum seekers] decreased. While in 2015 and 2016 people had arrived in buses, arrival significantly decreased later on. Later on, in some weeks one family came, some weeks later three families came, and then there were weeks when no one arrived here.” (interview 311, civil society/volunteer, own translation)

“[In 2015] the county founded a unit for asylum. Employees were assigned to this office and mainly had to deal with the issue of accommodation and ensuring basic services. We were searching nearly everywhere, and set up new accommodations. During this time, it became clear that it meant more than just providing a roof over people’s heads and food, but also of what happens to the people we accommodate, how we integrate them, and what about their prospects of staying, for a longer or shorter period of time.” (interview 149, county official, own translation)

The great interest in accommodation and housing can also be attributed to the fact that the events of 2015 and the need for hosting a large number of refugees can be seen as an exceptional situation in small municipalities in Saxony: Even though migration and integration processes have been ongoing (at least) since reunification, they remained somewhat overlooked as societal issues because the share of foreigners remained low. The county strategies of housing were highly discussed, as shown in the interviews and other data (e.g., NGO position papers and newspaper articles): The centralized housing strategy, as predominantly used in

Bautzen County, is viewed critically, especially by civil society actors. However, the newly-introduced obligation for a specific residence (“Wohnsitzauflage”) was not a topic of great interest – neither for most interviewees nor media coverage. One reason might be that it came into force in 2018 and therefore did not concern many refugees who arrived in 2015.

The analysis of the empirical data showed two central findings which address the regional specificity of the housing stock: First, even in smaller municipalities in Saxony, the housing capacities are usually found in public housing. Unlike other German municipalities (*Adam et al.* 2020: 215-216), the housing market is not as competitive. However, this leads to a particular type of spatial segregation as municipal housing is often connected to lower rent and thus are preferable places for the lower social strata of society (see 5.4). Secondly, for both collective accommodation and private apartments, large housing blocks built in the GDR were used.

5.1 Reception and housing facilities: Scenes of local (migration) history

As shown in Section 4, the Saxon counties do not have a long-standing and distinctive history of migration, and there is no pronounced collective identity as a region of immigration. However, the recent migration of asylum seekers brings up interviewees’ memories and sheds light on this neglected part of local history. Especially in Town I and Town II, some of these memories are linked to certain reception facilities or buildings formerly used to accommodate other migrant groups, while other memories refer to previous buildings:

“Here, in the early 90s, Bosnian refugees were accommodated at the beginning [of the reception period]. There were probably around five hundred at the peak, which, from my memory, went relatively trouble-free. There was also civic engagement by the churches, especially to help the people. And so this was the start of the reception center [in Town I].” (interview 145, mayor, own translation)

Several interviewees compared refugees and previous migrant groups and how they were perceived and compared to each other by the local population. Many of the former migrant groups were living in the same reception facilities or the same parts of town, e.g., contract workers in the GDR and ethnic German immigrants from Eastern Europe and Central Asia in the 1990s. Still, they were not as visible as the newly arrived refugees.

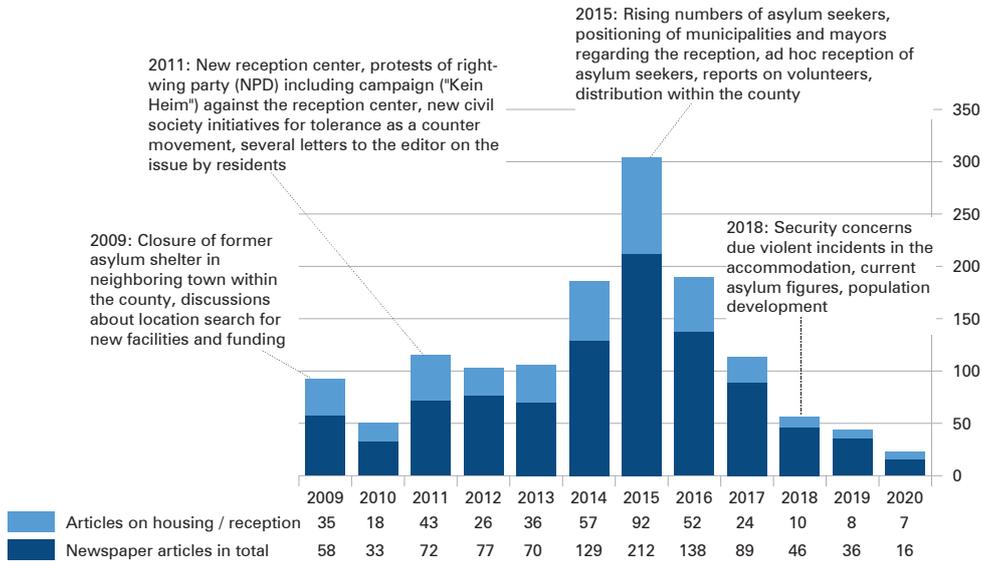
“Several years ago, a number of migrants, ethnic Germans and so on, came here from Kazakhstan. But I have to say for the majority of them it was only a temporary stopover. (...) There are still quite a few of this group, and, from my point of view, they don’t attract attention. So they don’t stand out too much in society.” (interview 296, civil society/volunteer, own translation)

One example from Town II also shows that the perception of different migrant groups can be comparable. In the following quote, a social worker refers to one part of the town:

“Here in [Town II], we had (...) immigration of ethnic Germans in the 1990s, and the mood was ‘Well, ... we ‘don’t want these Russlanddeutsche [ethnic Germans from Russia] here.’ Then, people got used to each other and they were no longer an issue. ‘Oh yes, they are very well integrated, they can speak German well by now and the children were in kindergarten and the next generation had grown up, so the issue was settled. Then, the refugees came: ‘It ‘won’t work with the refugees. We don’t want them.’ Everyone was skeptical. And then, the picture changed again, because now EU citizens have come and are basically causing problems that the other immigrants had not yet caused, so that the [migrant group of] refugees are no longer an issue.” (interview 311, civil society organization, own translation)

Refugee housing is a locally recurring issue in media coverage from 2009-2019: Even before 2014/2015, the topic of local housing and accommodation constituted a significant part of the articles dealing with migration and asylum issues in three of the four case studies (except for Village I, where no refugees were housed before 2014/2015). Figure 2 shows the trend of the number of published articles

Fig. 2: Town I: News coverage of the accommodation of refugees (keywords “asylum”, “migration”)



Source: own design

and selected years with information collected in the summarizing memos for Town I. 409 of 960 articles cover the issue of housing, with a peak of 92 articles in 2015. There was also a significant share in the years before and after. These numbers clearly illustrate that certain local events, moments of social contention (e.g., anti-immigrant-protests), and the opening of new reception facilities are prominently featured in local newspapers.

The conditions of accommodation are themselves shaped by local history and the socio-spatial context: A notable feature in the four municipalities is the availability of municipal housing stock and residential blocks built in the GDR. Former military buildings and schools were also used for accommodation.

5.2 Responsibilities for reception and housing as power mappings and supra-local alliances

The arena of accommodation and housing can be used for a situational mapping to showcase power constellations within the local reception regime in a broader sense. This became particularly clear when most interviewees, while speaking about accommodation, positioned themselves towards other actors and/or other decision-making levels. Moreover, many interviewees rejected their responsibility for reception and housing. This might not be a surprising result for civil society actors, but it is for local authorities and mayors.

For example, representatives of municipal authorities often refer to decisions made by county authorities or even the national government to frame their local governance approaches. This position is grounded on the fact, that the initial reception of asylum seekers is the responsibility of the federal state and then handed over to the county authorities. As the reception of refugees was heavily discussed within the population, several mayors dissociated themselves from the decisions made, even though they were influential in the decision-making process. Thus, the accommodation issue is perceived as a local problem, but apparently without any local mandate to act. This self-positioning is not only performed during the interviews, but can also be found in certain practices, as one example in Village I illustrates: In 2015, the county authorities decided to rent a former school building in the village for accommodating asylum seekers. The mayor then regularly reported in the official journal of the municipality to keep residents updated as the reception was heavily discussed and criticized:

“In order to fulfill the constitutional mandate with regard to the right of asylum, the distribution among the federal states is regulated by the ‘Königsteiner Schlüssel’ [distribution quota]. The federal states have agreed on who receives how many and which refugees because they are the receiving destinations. They also decide the determination of safe third countries. By law, the Länder act as accommodation authorities for the asylum seekers. [...] The county itself is only the sum of its municipalities, in which the accommodations are set up.” (official journal of the municipality, 2015, own translation)

The mayor refers to the legal obligation and decision-making of the federal and county authorities and thereby distances himself from the political decisions made at the national and state levels.

In both counties, most mayors were not willing to welcome asylum seekers voluntarily in 2015. This positioning of municipal leaders led to supra-local alliances: In November 2015, 48 mayors of municipalities in the county of Bautzen started a joint initiative by writing a position paper (“Grundsatzklärung”), addressed to former chancellor Angela Merkel, to take a stand against the further reception of migrants and national asylum politics. Due to the centralized distribution mechanism in Bautzen, only a few of the mayors who joined the position paper actually had to accommodate asylum seekers, while the others nonetheless felt the need to position themselves against any possible future allocation:

“We bear responsibility for many active citizens and responsible people who helped to build this country over the past 25 years, especially here in East Germany. We are increasingly concerned to see the decrease in social harmony, internal security, and human values; it endangers our country.” [letter by mayors in Bautzen County to chancellor Merkel, November 2015, own translation]

This quote illustrates the close links between public discourses at the local level and policymaking at the national level as perceived by municipal actors. The participating mayors chose to emphasize the rejecting attitudes of the population rather than the supportive ones. Immigration to the localities, as stated in the letter, was seen as a threat to society. In this way, the mayors did not demand more local power but rather asked for the “exclusive responsibility” [letter of mayors 2015] over asylum procedures from the federal government. *Haselbacher* and *Segarra* also found such strategic partnerships in their work on mayors in rural municipalities, who formed alliances to “regain power and control over the reception process” (*Haselbacher/Segarra 2022: 11*).

Another strategy could be found in the county of Nordsachsen: The mayor of Village II described that many other municipalities were not willing to take in asylum seekers, so he tried to talk to other mayors and tried to find collaborators for the reception of migrants:

“In the beginning [2015], it became clear that many other mayors looked away. They ducked their heads and created a situation so that they ‘didn’t have to accommodate people. They said, ‘I don’t have any apartments available’, they just ducked out, said ‘that’s a federal matter, ‘it’s none of our business’. Some of it is true, because it was imposed on us, to be fair. (...) But I see it [the reception of refugees] as my job and that’s why I do it. And of course, I also try to talk to other colleagues, to know their opinion. We have collaborations in the sense that we communicate with each other. We have WhatsApp [messenger] groups where we simply

exchange ideas (...) And so, we try to find some collaborators.” (interview 167, mayor, own translation)

Here, the mayor acted in a pragmatic matter, seeing reception as a municipal duty. Still, he also offered flats for two reasons: the significant public housing stock in the village, and a forward-looking stance concerning local demographic decline:

“Our kindergartens are empty, and we have some capacity in schools. [...] What we need is people.” (interview 167, mayor, own translation)

These examples give a brief impression of positioning processes that often boil down to being for or against shelters, affecting all actors. Civil society interviewees often took a more distanced stance towards the municipal representatives and demanded, for example, long-term strategies for societal integration and for mayors to clearly distance themselves from right-wing protests:⁷

“For example, I think we have the wrong [integration] strategies here at the local level. (...) The migrants are *our* people, even if they are only temporary residents, *they belong here*. And I think someone in the town [administration] should also take responsibility for this.” (interview 299, political actor, own translation).

This is a highly regionally influenced issue, as the numbers of racist incidents – often happening at reception facilities – are higher in Saxony, and Bautzen in particular, than elsewhere in Germany (*Osigus et al.* 2019: 91-92).

5.3 Reception facilities as drivers of solidarity and conflict

In the context of refugee reception and especially the set-up of new accommodation facilities, processes of social change can be observed in the case studies. As throughout Germany, in all four cases, civil society played a significant role in the practical challenge of taking in refugees (e.g., setting up accommodation, distributing clothes). They also conducted integration measures, social counseling, and language courses. This was particularly evident in the data of municipalities with centralized reception facilities, where formal volunteer groups were established around collective accommodation facilities (Bautzen County). All interviewees from civil society groups had also previously been active members of the local community, such as church groups, political parties, and other local non-profit organizations. In many cases, the opening of a reception center represented a starting point for

⁷ In this paper, it is not possible to take a closer look at the reactions of the population itself, but the fieldwork, interviews, and documents showed significant polarization. These reactions were also perceived by political stakeholders. Therefore, access to some locations as well as interview requests were refused. Several municipal stakeholders were worried about their reputation, because refugee reception is not perceived a “positive” political issue.

long-term volunteer work regarding refugees. For example, several interviewees began to take care of language courses in a center. This was especially important in both villages, which had no official language classes. Over time, the commitment of many volunteers decreased, and fewer people are involved. An example of this is the welcome initiative in Village I, which was founded at the time the center was set up: “Well, we manage everything almost alone. Currently, there are only three of us left.” (interview 156, civil society/volunteer, own translation), reports one of the founding members of the group. Here and in other case study sites, many retirees, former church employees, and teachers got involved. This also applies to follow-up housing, as volunteers helped to look for flats and provided help and equipment for moving. But reception facilities remain central places of engagement.

The reception of refugees also led to new cooperation between different local actors: Over time, exchange formats, such as round tables, were created at the county level for volunteers from the municipalities and professionals in integration work (mostly at county level). Unlike in many urban regions, there were only few associations and professional staff with intercultural expertise.

In both villages, volunteers represent the only on-site contacts, especially in the reception centers; and therefore often act as troubleshooters on short notice for issues such as trips to the foreigners’ office. This creates a two-way dependency between the administration and civil society. Thus, situations of frustration for both administration and volunteers are common. For example, in several interviews and field trips, access to the reception centers and the use of facilities (e.g., for language classes) was an issue of discussion between the local authorities and civil society actors. The distribution of funding by the Ministry of Social Affairs covering expenses for volunteers has also been a subject of discussion, as the volunteers must apply through the county offices, not directly with the state ministry. This example illustrates the strong interrelationships of (in particular regional and local) levels and actors.

However, the initial motivation of many volunteers must not only be seen as driven by a humanitarian mindset, but as a product of social demarcation. Several groups, especially in the county of Bautzen, started their activities in reaction to right-wing protests against new housing facilities and other forms of rejection of asylum seekers (such as petitions).

“We are a group of citizens who agree that we must stand up for refugees. It actually started because the NPD [a far-right party] was planning to protest in front of the reception facility. Then our alliance was founded and citizens of the town said, ‘Okay, let’s stand up against the right wing and see what we can do about it.’ In the beginning, it was no formal association. Then in 2016, [association name] was founded.” interview 298, civil society/volunteer, own translation)

Most initiatives, also in other municipalities, use terms such as “democracy”, “diversity” and “humanity” in their names, reflecting principles of democratic coexistence. However, despite being highly motivated to stand up against right-

wing groups and their activities (e.g., through counterdemonstrations), most do not see themselves as “activists”. This observation shows that migrant reception in localities is not only conditioned by legislation, policy, and legal obligations. Rather, migration regimes constitute “arenas of conflict and cooperation” (Oltmer 2018: 7). The decision-making on accommodation but also the housing facilities themselves constitute such spaces of conflict and cooperation.

5.4 Housing and reception facilities as spatial and temporal production of migration

Another set of findings relates to local practices. Practices such as housing strategies and discourses about these strategies function as spatial production of migration. The results show that the negotiation about and decision-making for new reception facilities play a significant role in the debate about migration. In many of the interviews, housing strategies serve as a yardstick of integration in a broader sense: For example, decentralized housing is often associated with the idea that it promotes social integration; centralized housing and mass accommodation, on the other hand, are usually associated with a lower likelihood of integration.

Another finding points to the exclusionary consequences of housing practices usually known from urban contexts: Most asylum seekers and recognized refugees live in municipal housing stock, as it is widely available in both counties, and access is provided mostly with the support of social workers and municipal officials. This was particularly evident in the two examined towns. Municipal apartment buildings are often placed near each other, sometimes for practical reasons for social workers and the municipal housing society. These apartments are also often set in stigmatized neighborhoods because municipal housing mainly hosts residents who receive social welfare. This is a specific problem in Town II (Nordsachsen): Since the 1990s, different migrant groups have largely lived in one part of the town, and refugees have also been brought there. For years, the number of Eastern European migrants increased, often working in precarious factory jobs. This is accompanied by problems in the neighborhood and the perception of migration as a problem.

“In this respect, [this town district] is a ‘problem zone’ because it has developed into a socially troubled area, because not only a lot of newcomers from abroad but also many socially deprived Germans live here.” (interview 310, civil society organization, own translation)

In Town I, most of the refugees also live in the same neighborhood:

“Almost all [of the refugees] live here in [town district]. There are two blocks of flats where they distributed them, but that doesn’t work. It always depends on the housing situation, the capacity, the possibilities. And here, it is like a small Kreuzberg [district in Berlin].” (interview 298, civil society/volunteer, own translation)

In many cases, these municipal apartments are placed in large residential blocks (built in the GDR). Consequently, even so-called “decentralized” accommodation (meaning own apartments rather than collective reception centers) does not necessarily mean that refugee households are mixed with other households in a building, to provide opportunities for encounter and inclusion.

Furthermore, it became evident that there is a temporary character in the local negotiation of refugee reception. For example, several interview partners described them as “guests.” One of our interview partners assumed that this could also have to do with the structure of rural societies between “newcomers” and “residents”.

“From my perspective, this is often linked to sort of a two-class society. So that even the municipal authorities and decision-makers perceive them [the refugees] as guests and not as residents.” (interview 306, civil society organization, own translation)

This example clearly shows the relevance of spatially sensitive perspectives in migration studies: “The rural” not only serves as a spatial but also as a societal category, including ideas of a homogeneous society that is reluctant to social changes (*Hubbard* 2005: 62-63). However, it cannot be determined conclusively whether these phenomena are produced by rural or social-structural regional phenomena (“super-homogeneous”, *Rees et al.* 2022).

6 Discussion: Understanding refugee reception through the lens of Local Migration Regimes

The perspective of Local Migration Regimes promises useful insights for case studies and comparative locality studies by emphasizing spatial context, actors, and power constellations. As a first step towards addressing Local Migration Regimes through empirical studies, I suggest highlighting contextual factors (see Section 4) as recognition of space in empirical designs.

The counties of Bautzen and Nordsachsen provide distinctive contexts as rural counties and post-socialist immigration societies. In the municipalities discussed here, refugee reception is seen as a (temporal) challenge rather than as a chance for rural development. To a certain extent, this might be explained by past experience (or rather non-experience) with migrant integration, resulting in a lack of awareness of local migration history. Furthermore, the right-wing political landscape influences decision-making and actor constellations. This was particularly notable in the two case studies of Bautzen. It remains unclear to what extent these attitudes are rooted in the rural context or the post-socialist setting (see, e.g., *Hinger/Schäfer* 2019: 73-74).

As previous research suggested, the area of refugee accommodation is an essential field for negotiating migration. As one issue within a broader Local Migration Regime, it shows actor constellations on the local level, including conflicts and collaborative practices (e.g., in the decision-making for collective accommodation). The “long summer of migration” in 2014/2015 can be described

as a driver for social change and the emergence of civil society action on migration-related issues. This has been linked to the set-up of housing facilities. However, civil society action, municipal self-perception, and local solidarity discourse are far from the “solidarity city” movements observed in many urban contexts (*Bendel et al.* 2019). The findings support *Cabral* and *Swerts’* regime analysis in rural Portugal in that the pressuring role of civil society/pro-migrant groups is rare or absent when compared to urban contexts (*Cabral/Swerts* 2021: 192). In the case studies in Saxony, more pressure coming from anti-migrant groups and petitions was found. Migrant reception in localities is conditioned by legislation, policy, and legal obligations because migration regimes create “arenas of conflict and cooperation” (*Oltmer* 2018: 7) also driven by societal perceptions of migration and political actor constellations.

The findings also challenge the image of rural areas as idyllic places of migrant reception: Even though certain “urban problems” such as a shortage of housing are less pressing, the study demonstrates spatial challenges which have often been described as urban phenomena: Similar to *Kreichauf’s* (2015) findings, this paper shows exclusionary processes such as “spatial isolation” and “decentral location” by housing strategies (*Kreichauf* 2015: 20). The placement of refugees within localities can also be seen as a reflection of societal negotiation surrounding the housing question. This shows how rural regions not only constitute “spatial contexts” for the reception of migrants, but also contribute to “spatial production” of migration (*Pott* 2018: 121-122). The latter can be shaped, for example, by social practices that affect migration and, for example, generate exclusionary mechanisms. However, the spatial features might impact this social production of migration. In the case studies such practices were seen, for example, in solidarity initiatives but also counter-movements, such as xenophobic protests.

The protests organized by right-wing parties as well as actions by local officials and civil society illustrate how contentious refugee accommodation is at the local level. Some municipal authorities have built supra-local alliances against national decision-making, especially in Bautzen County. In contrast, the mayor of the Nordsachsen village case chose a more receptive approach based on socio-economic assumptions of demographic development. This highlights the fragmentation of reception policies. Thus, the rural case studies imply that Local Migration Regimes are not only “local”, but also strongly embedded the county and state levels. Due to limited resources and less experience with the reception of migrants, supra-municipal cooperation and dependencies of the intermediate level are more distinct than in the context of cities.

In sum, examining refugee reception through the lens of Local Migration Regimes highlights the “complexity of constellations” (*Bernt* 2019: 11) but challenges an empirical analytic framework: The perspective of Local Migration Regimes indicates a multi-method approach, which is a challenge for empirical analysis. It, therefore, limits the analytical depth of the particular aspects and qualitative data material. However, this heuristic framework provides an overview about most important contextual features of the case studies and the societal negotiations of migration-

related issues. A further benefit of this concept is the interdisciplinary links between perspectives inspired by political scientist, human geographers and sociologists.

7 Concluding remarks

This paper examines the reception and housing of refugees by applying the Local Migration Regime perspective to rural contexts. Using this heuristic framework, the findings illustrate that the negotiation of migration and also the reception of refugees is not a new issue, but a recurrent and contested one in the last decade. Additionally, the example of refugee reception reveals a broad picture of social structures such as positioning processes among civil society and political actors driven by regional public opinion.

The analysis goes beyond commonly-examined urban settings, providing both empirical and methodological insights. Four municipal contexts in two counties in Saxony (Bautzen and Nordsachsen) are explored. These counties developed different approaches towards the reception and housing of refugees. The findings highlight the importance of studying migration through a local lens, showing a fragmentation and strong dependencies between the different levels constituting migration regimes (national, regional and supra-local).

The study has certain limitations: Migrant/refugee perspectives were not directly included in the analysis since the questionnaire of the migrant interviews is only of limited relevance to the research question of this paper. However, these perspectives are part of the field experiences (and memos) of the framework project from which the data originated.⁸ In further research, both perspectives should be addressed.

The framework itself sets another restriction: It is limited to capturing regime settings as a whole, as opposed to using, for example, a discourse method or empirical framework on local policies. However, it carries implications for further case studies in rural areas. From a conceptual point of view, the regime perspective broadens the analysis of local cases but also challenges research concepts with respect to operationalization. In this contribution, the inductive analysis of interviews and examination of other data sources (newspaper articles, collected documents, and fieldwork memos) were helpful in applying this broader view. For more in-depth studies of Local Migration Regimes, I suggest fewer numbers of cases and longer-term fieldwork to cover temporal developments. Further, the aspects of local regimes should be linked to existing explanatory concepts. For rural regions, research remains a practical challenge, mainly due to the larger research area and long travel distances, compared to cities (covering municipalities and counties as "the local").

⁸ For further insights see, e.g., *Weidinger/Kordel* 2020; *Glorius et al.* 2021.

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