

# Bern

## The progressive stronghold of Switzerland

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# 1. Abstract & Takeaways

## Key Takeaways:

# 1

A positive attitude towards migrants and anti-racist initiatives within the Bernese administration contributes to a strong collaboration between the city and civil society.

# 2

The city's recognition of the importance of local civil society infrastructure is reflected in the 'Integration Award' and the 'Social Award', with which the city expresses appreciation for this work.

## What is unique about the city?

**Interpreting federal law in favour of migrant interests:** Bern, which is governed by the left, has been intensively publicly committed to accepting refugees since 2015. Like most capitals, Bern plays a special role in the national political structure. For this reason, it is an important role model for Switzerland, which is very conservative on the whole. The city government has repeatedly spoken out to the federal government in favour of additional refugee admission.

## What is the focus of local migration policies?

**Shaping local admission policies:** Compared to other large Swiss cities such as Zurich, Basel or Geneva, the city of Bern stands out because it has its own municipal migration office. This partially compensates for the lack of authority over immigration law, which in Switzerland is at the national level, and leads to a greater room for manoeuvre for local authorities in terms of admission practices. The combination of a left-wing government and a well-developed civil society has given rise to an entire infrastructure of anti-racist projects in Bern. These seek to facilitate the integration of arrivals with and without papers.

## What are the most outstanding results so far?

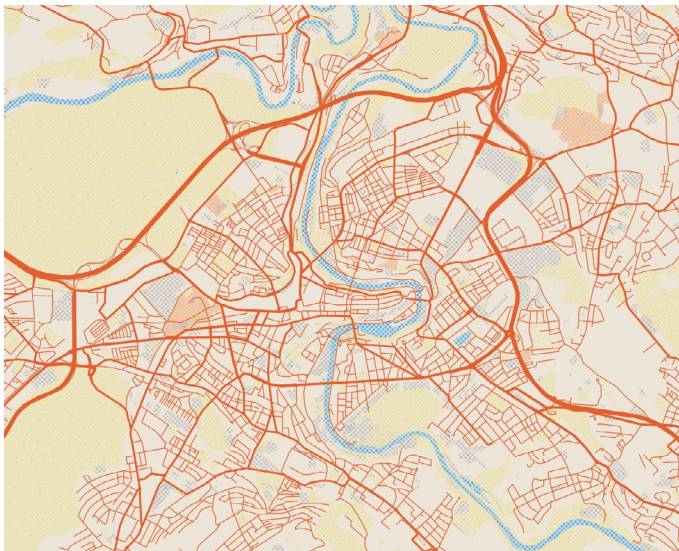
**The digital City ID:** The planned introduction of a Swiss-wide digital City Card that will facilitate urban citizenship for the local undocumented community would be a pioneering achievement. It would increase access to multiple local services for the undocumented and it could create a positive dynamic, leading to increased recognition and better living conditions. In addition, in 2017 Bern was one of the first Swiss municipalities to set up a counselling centre together with the Protestant Church to support migrants on their way into employment that matches their qualifications.

## Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Local networks such as “We Are All Bern” or the “Migrant Solidarity Network,” together with left-wing local politicians, have ensured that Bern has been increasingly active on the institutional level in advocating together with other Swiss cities for the direct reception of refugees. In November 2020, the municipal parliament passed a resolution: the city of Bern should take in not 20, but 500 refugees from Moria, saying that 20 were far too few for the capital of the rich country of Switzerland. The “urgent motion” was carried by a large majority. Councillor Franziska Teuscher said in the Council that Bern wants to continue to lobby the federal government for the immediate admission of more refugees. The city of Bern was committed to this together with nine other large cities.

**“To accommodate 20 people from Moria is far too little for the capital of the rich country of Switzerland. Bern could easily provide financially for 500 people, and accommodation would be feasible in the short term.”**

“Motion” in the municipal parliament of Bern by the Green-Alternative Party (GaP), Party of Labor (PdA) and Alternative Left (AL), November 2020



### Population

143,222

### Location

Capital of Switzerland and the canton of Bern

### Mayor

Alec von Graffenried  
(Grüne Freie Liste, Greens)

## 2. Local background and context

*Compared to other large Swiss cities such as Zurich, Basel or Geneva, the city of Bern stands out because it has its own municipal migration office. An open-minded city administration and an active network of civil society organisations are the main factors behind progressive policies such as the planned digital City-ID.*

Compared to most other Swiss municipalities, Bern has a great advantage in shaping progressive policies towards undocumented migrants: it has a municipal migration office (“Einwohnerdienste, Migration und Fremdenpolizei”, EMF). Even though the municipal police was merged into the cantonal police in 2011, the responsibility for migration remained with the city – unlike other Swiss cantons. This makes an important political difference, because the majority of representatives in the Cantonal Council belong to less liberal parties than in the City Council of Bern. At the same time, the administrative reform accompanying the subsumption of the city police has meant that there are clear boundaries within which the city can act towards undocumented migrants.

## Progressive administration

The Bernese administration and civil society more broadly share a positive attitude towards migrants. Two quotes may illustrate this: “Those who live here, work here, cultivate friendships here and raise their children here, should also be able to help shape that ‘here’,” says local councillor Franziska Teuscher. Susanne Rebsamen, leader of the municipal “Office for Migration and Racism issues”, says that recognizing all those living in Bern as Bernese would be an adaptation to the current post-migrant reality in the city:

**“Whoever is here, belongs here. You shouldn’t create categories of ‘us’ and ‘them’, of ‘foreign’ and ‘different’: it is about those who are here. That corresponds to the reality.”**

## Difficult circumstances for undocumented migrants

Currently the only legal means to achieve a residence permit of undocumented migrants is through a ‘hardship application’. This is usually examined by the cantonal authorities then forwarded to the State Secretariat for Migration (SEM), a federal authority, for a final decision. The SEM most often follows the recommendations of the regional authorities. In Bern’s case, this is the migration office “Einwohnerdienste, Migration und Fremdenpolizei” (EMF).

The Bernese counseling center for undocumented migrants emphasizes that there is an established cooperation with the EMF. The cooperation has worked well so far and allows for pragmatic practice, according to a survey by Sarah Schilliger, sociologist and migration researcher from the university of Bern.

Hardship applications are processed faster and more efficiently in Bern than in other cities. Among other things, school-age children with irregular status are examined to determine whether a residence permit can be issued for the duration of their education, and whether residence can be granted for their parents through a hardship application.

Migrants’ right to elementary education is also widely accepted in Bern’s municipal institutions. According to the counseling center for undocu-

mented migrants, the right is well understood: authorities have internalized that “access must be possible for every child,” said a staff member – including access to preschool out-of-home care.

In terms of healthcare, little responsibility lies in municipal hands. Civil society and charitable organizations play a larger role. For example, undocumented migrants are assisted by the Health Care Centre for Sans-Papiers (run by the Swiss Red Cross) and the Advice Centre for Sans-Papiers, among others, in obtaining health insurance and access to premium reductions. The Health Care Centre for Sans-Papiers offers basic health care services, for which it relies on a wide network of doctors who act as volunteers.

## A dense civil society infrastructure

Overall, there are many civil society organizations, NGOs and initiatives in Bern working and volunteering for and with people with precarious/no residence status. Focus areas include legal counseling, education, accommodation, language classes, free lunches, health and help for victims of domestic violence. Civil society organizations function as a hinge between undocumented migrants and municipal institutions, says Sarah Schilliger, sociologist from the University of Bern. An established collaboration between civil society and the city has thereby emerged. The head of the EMF, Alexander Ott, says: “We have a different culture here than in other places. I think that also has to do with the fact that the authorities here are approachable, and have established a relationship of trust with various players.”

Many of these organizations collaborate with the city to varying degrees and sometimes receive financial resources. In some areas, it is proving successful that some social services for illegalized migrants tend to be taken over by non-governmental organizations, which on the one hand have no reporting obligations towards national migration authorities and on the other hand, enjoy greater trust among Sans-Papiers, says Schilliger.

Bern’s recognition of the importance of this civil society infrastructure is reflected, for example, in the ‘Integration Award’ and the ‘Social Award’, with which the city expresses appreciation for this work. In 2013, the Integration Award went to the **Advice Center for Sans-Papiers**. In 2017, the City of Bern’s Integration Prize was awarded to the “**Autonome Schule denk:mal**” with its diverse offers like language courses for Sans-Papiers, while another prize went to the “Ziegler and Viktoria Volunteers” for their commitment to a living culture of welcome. In 2020, the Social Price was given to **Medina – Mobile Community Centre**, for their social support to migrants with no or precarious status, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The cooperation between the city and various civil society actors (including churches) also manifested itself during the Corona crisis, when they built up a Corona bridging assistance for Sans-Papiers with loss of income.

## Other important civil society organizations are:

- ◆ **“We are all Bern”** - platform that advocates for a solidary city of Bern in which diversity and migration are recognised as a social reality and also promotes the “City Card”
  - ◆ **“Solidarity City Mapping”** is working on an alternative city guide of solidarity structures, which could be linked to the City Card.
- ◆ **Red Cross** – Health care for Sans-Papiers
- ◆ **Solidarity Network**
- ◆ **Migrant Solidarity Network MSN**
- ◆ **Augen auf Bern**

## 3. Selected local approaches to migration and inclusion policies

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### 3.1. Digital City Card

*After years of preparation for a Bern City Card for Urban Citizenship for undocumented migrants, strict austerity measures have made the introduction of all new projects impossible. However, the city administration wants to make a virtue out of necessity – the City Card is now to come as part of the digital proof of identity for all Bernese, which is to be introduced anyway.*

The Advice Center for undocumented migrants assumes that there are about 1,100 living in the city of Bern. The center divides these into primary undocumented migrants, who never had a residence permit (e.g. for irregular or tourist entry), and secondary: these previously had a valid residence permit in Switzerland, for example as asylum seekers, and are therefore known to the migration authorities to some extent.

Initiated by the civil-society collective “We all are Bern” and the Advice Center for Sans-Papiers in Bern, later also within the red-green parties that govern Bern, a discussion has been going on since 2016 about the introduction of a City Card to facilitate Urban Citizenship for the local Sans Papiers community.

The municipal council has taken up this concern and stipulated the examination of a City Card in the “Priority Plan Integration 2018-2021”<sup>1</sup>: “The city participates in the debate on the concept of ‘urban citizenship’ and strives to introduce a City Card in order to promote the participation of all residents regardless of their residence status,” the plan states.

“Like everywhere in Switzerland, undocumented migrants in Bern live in constant fear of being exposed and deported. Their precarious resi-

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bern.ch/politik-und-verwaltung/stadtverwaltung/bss/fachstelle-fuer-migrations-und-rassismusfragen/schwerpunkteplan-integrationspolitik/downloads/schwerpunkteplan-webversion.pdf/view>



dence and work situation puts this population group under great pressure. Within the administration, we try to use all our room for maneuver” said the responsible Green city councilor Franziska Teuscher.

## A City Card for all residents

An interdepartmental working group examined possible applications. The conclusion was that Bern sees opportunities in the City Card to be a “symbol of a solidary and cosmopolitan city”, to provide “proof of identity for all” and to facilitate access to services and opportunities for participation.<sup>2</sup>

Councilor Teuscher said that with the ID everyone can “show that their center of life is in the city of Bern and that they feel a sense of belonging to the city of Bern – regardless of their origin, residence status, etc.”. The ID should also be designed in such a way that undocumented migrants “no longer have to be afraid to use important services. It is therefore necessary to weigh up symbolic and real improvements.”

The city council then commissioned a preliminary project to examine opening points in depth – such as the possible concrete benefits of the card for undocumented migrants, and a possible link with the “Swiss-pass”<sup>3</sup> in public transport or open legal questions. The council also relied on a legal study<sup>4</sup> commissioned by the city of Zurich.

In October 2020, an externally prepared preliminary study was sent to the Bern Integration Competence Center. The city council now plans to introduce the Card. The decisive debate in the city council and city parliament was scheduled for fall/winter 2021/2022.

## A smart move: Digitalizing the City Card

After massive financial losses<sup>5</sup> in 2019 and 2020, the city council decided on an austerity package: planned investments were to be reduced and there should not be any new projects. This also affected the plans for a City Card. However, in response, the city council is now planning to make the City Card part of the digitization strategy<sup>6</sup> that has already been decided – and largely financed.

Instead of a plastic card, the City Card is now to be integrated into a smartphone-app in the form of a QR code. Like the Zurich City Card, it should not be exclusively for undocumented migrants, but rather a regular digital identity card for all citizens – and all other residents.

It is planned that probably an NGO will issue the City Card for Sans-Papiers, provided they credibly prove that they live in the city. This way, the center would not have to contact the authorities.

It is already certain that the City Card cannot have the effect of ratifying residence – because Bern, as a municipality, has its own migration office, but no police force of its own. So the city cannot instruct the cantonal police to accept a City Card as proof of identity during identity checks.

<sup>2</sup> Urban Citizenship and City Card, Documentation on the “Migration Exchange Meeting” of December 6, 2018

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.swisspass.ch/home>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/prd/de/index/stadtentwicklung/integrationsfoerderung/integrationsthemen/sans-papiers.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.derbund.ch/die-stadt-bern-praesentiert-ihre-sparplaene-313274874139>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bern.ch/themen/stadt-recht-und-politik/digital-stadt-bern/digitalstrategie>

And the federal government has already said<sup>7</sup> about Zurich's City Card that it is not prepared to instruct its subordinate police force to do so. Overall, the influence of Bern on the authorities that enforce migration law is low, because they are either organized on a cantonal level or require data on residence status to fulfill their legal duties.

## **New possibilities and access to services for undocumented migrants**

However, the City Card would enable undocumented migrants to identify themselves to municipal authorities without having to disclose data on their residence status. It would also allow them to prove their residency and facilitate access to certain municipal and private services and facilities. At the same time, the City Card could help increase their confidence to access elementary school, daycare centers, and day schools or other municipal services.

Hospitals and other health services are not owned by the city, but possibly the establishment of the City Card might lead to individual institutions deciding to accept the card and thus also simplify certain administrative processes.

The acceptance of the City Card for renting municipal apartments would be conceivable. If the card becomes more and more established, it could lead to other landlords, such as housing cooperatives, accepting it. Likewise, the city can instruct its municipal libraries to accept it. As for the widespread problems with opening an account or a cell phone contract, as soon as a City Card would be established in the public sector, certain banks and telecommunication companies could be approached to accept the City Card.

Overall, the City Card has the potential to empower and grant access to municipal services for migrants, although many institutions such as schools or daycare centers are already formally accessible without risk. Nevertheless, the low numbers of people using the contact points in cases of domestic/sexual violence (similarly few use daycare centers) indicate that undocumented migrants often don't dare to turn to these institutions. The City Card can be used as a means of communicating that they have legal rights and that services are accessible without fear. This can lead to a growth in trust and thus to an empowerment of undocumented migrants, and increase the low-threshold nature of certain institutions.

Even though there is a broad political majority in the city in favor of the City Card, such a project is of course not without controversy. The right-wing populist Swiss People's Party (SVP) is strictly against such moves. It could not prevent them in a vote, but it could initiate a referendum. However, there is no need to fear such a step, says the sociologist Sarah Schilliger: "The city's population, which after all voted for the left-wing government, should clearly confirm the project, and then the dispute will also be decided socially."

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/polizei-wird-zuercher-city-card-nicht-nerkennen-681983063301>



## 3.2. Counseling center HEKS MosaiQ

*The majority of refugees and non-EU migrants have professional skills. In Switzerland however, these are often not formally recognized. The widespread consequence is unemployment or employment in precarious conditions below the qualification level. In 2017, Bern was one of the first Swiss municipalities to establish a counseling center with the Protestant Church that supports qualified migrants on their way to employment adequate to their qualifications.*

In 2017, the Swiss Interchurch Aid organization (HEKS) launched a campaign called Giving Opportunities. It addressed educated migrants whose professional diplomas or skills are not recognized in Switzerland. Across Switzerland, there are about 50,000 such immigrants from countries outside the EU/EFTA who, despite holding professional diplomas or academic degrees from their home countries or simply being experienced skilled workers, are either unemployed or working in jobs for which they are clearly overqualified.

The Swiss Coordination Office for Education Research points out that more and more professions in Switzerland are being regulated<sup>8</sup> – i.e. only holders of recognized degrees are allowed to work – making it more difficult for foreign-borns to gain access to these professions. Potential employers find it difficult to assess foreign qualifications and foreign diplomas might not meet formal Swiss standards.

In August 2017, at the same time as the start of the nationwide campaign, the MosaiQ<sup>9</sup> specialist office was launched in Bern as a joint project of the HEKS regional office in Bern and the Competence Center Work of the city of Bern. Since then, it has been offering advice, support and placement services for qualified migrants.

### Supporting migrants with professional qualifications

The city pointed out that the majority of migrants in Switzerland have a professional or university degree, but this group is most affected by unemployment and overqualification. Of the 46,000 people living on social welfare in the canton of Bern, 40 percent are foreign-born. MosaiQ Bern would support qualified migrants to bring their skills into the Swiss labor market.

MosaiQ is accessible to qualified migrants between the ages of 25 and 55 who reside in the Canton of Bern. It offers them help with the recognition of diplomas and with catching up on their education – i.e. if it is determined that the education in their home country did not include elements required in Switzerland. In addition, the office arranges internships, apprenticeships and first jobs and offers “coaching on the job” for sustainable professional integration. Migrants who do not have a formal qualification but have many years of work experience in their country of origin can also take advantage of the service. These include recognized refugees and temporarily admitted persons, as well as persons who have come to Switzerland through family reunification.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.20min.ch/story/sind-die-huerden-fuer-migranten-zu-hoch-751634563653>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell\\_ptk/neue-fachstelle-fuer-qualifizierte-migrantinnen-und-migranten?searchterm=mosaiq](https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell_ptk/neue-fachstelle-fuer-qualifizierte-migrantinnen-und-migranten?searchterm=mosaiq)

## 4. Advocacy and network activities

*Local networks such as We Are All Bern and the Migrant Solidarity Network, together with local left-wing politicians, have for years ensured that Bern has been active – along with other Swiss cities – in advocating for the reception of refugees.*

When the number of refugees increased in Switzerland in 2016, Bern's city council decided that the city should accommodate not only its assigned asylum seekers, but also voluntarily take in another 350. The refugees were to be allowed to enter directly from camps on the Mediterranean. The motion, carried by 42 votes to 17, was reminiscent of similar actions by the cities of Zurich and Barcelona.<sup>10</sup> The city government declared that it would examine "in cooperation with international organizations" how Bern could directly accept refugees.<sup>11</sup>

### Joining 'Solidarity Cities'

In 2018, the City Council decided to join the "Solidarity Cities" initiative of the EUROCITIES city network. "Cities are the main stakeholders in the current refugee crisis – an estimated two-thirds of all people fleeing today are staying in cities", the council stated.<sup>12</sup> A few weeks later, the municipal council decided to support the campaign of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Cities alongside Refugees #WithRefugees".<sup>13</sup>

### Moria: #evacuatenow

In March 2020, 50,000 people in Switzerland addressed the national government, the Federal Council, with the appeal #evacuatenow ("#evakuierenJETZT"), demanding that "as many refugees as possible from the Aegean be brought to Switzerland."<sup>14</sup> Among the first signatories were two members of the Bern city government: city president Alec von Graffenried and director of education, social affairs and sports Franziska Teuscher.<sup>15</sup> The eight largest Swiss cities, including Bern, appealed directly<sup>16</sup> to the national government in June 2020 – to no avail. When the Moria camp burned in September 2020, Bern's municipal government declared its intention to receive 20 refugees from Moria directly into Bern – as did other Swiss cities – and called on federal authorities to accept additional refugees from Moria in Switzerland, beyond existing commitments.<sup>17 18</sup>

In November 2020, the municipal parliament passed a resolution: the city of Bern would take in not 20 but 500<sup>19</sup> refugees from Moria. The "urgent motion" was carried by a large majority. Councilor Franziska Teuscher said that Bern would continue to lobby the federal government for the immediate admission of additional refugees. Nine other large cities also committed to the same.

In January 2021, Teuscher gave a testimonial at Eurocities' Solidarity Cities Network, pointing out:

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bernerzeitung.ch/region/bern/350-weitere-fluechtlinge-fuer-bern/story/17834875>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.bernerzeitung.ch/region/bern/350-weitere-fluechtlinge-fuer-bern/story/17834875>

<sup>12</sup> [https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell\\_ptk/stadt-bern-will-sich-solidarity-cities-initiative-anschliessen?searchterm=solidarity](https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell_ptk/stadt-bern-will-sich-solidarity-cities-initiative-anschliessen?searchterm=solidarity)

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell\\_ptk/gemeinderat-unterstuetzt-unhcr-kampagne-withrefugees?searchterm=f%C3%BCchtlinge](https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell_ptk/gemeinderat-unterstuetzt-unhcr-kampagne-withrefugees?searchterm=f%C3%BCchtlinge)

<sup>14</sup> <https://evakuieren-jetzt.ch/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://evakuieren-jetzt.ch/erstunterzeichnerinnen/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.bernerzeitung.ch/teuscher-macht-druck-auf-den-bundesrat-992481817444>

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell\\_ptk/stadt-bern-will-fluechtlinge-aus-moria-aufnehmen](https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell_ptk/stadt-bern-will-fluechtlinge-aus-moria-aufnehmen)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.bernerzeitung.ch/teuscher-macht-druck-auf-den-bundesrat-992481817444>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.bernerzeitung.ch/bern-soll-500-fluechtlingen-aus-moria-aufnehmen-939599843134>

**“In the refugee crisis, cities bear a special responsibility: two thirds of all refugees live in cities – here in Europe, but also in cities in crisis regions. As a city of solidarity and openness, the City of Bern intends to live up to this responsibility.”<sup>20</sup>**

## 5. Update: What is new in 2023?

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<sup>20</sup> <https://solidaritycities.eu/testimonials/113-executive-council-of-bern-franziska-teuscher-on-solidarity-cities>

<sup>21</sup> [https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell\\_ptk/gemeinderat-spricht-projektierungskredit-fuer-city-card-bern?searchterm=City%20Card](https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell_ptk/gemeinderat-spricht-projektierungskredit-fuer-city-card-bern?searchterm=City%20Card)  
and  
[https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell\\_ptk/schwerpunkteplan-migration-und-rassismus-verabschiedet?searchterm=Migration%20und%20Rassismus](https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell_ptk/schwerpunkteplan-migration-und-rassismus-verabschiedet?searchterm=Migration%20und%20Rassismus)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.bern.ch/themen/gesundheits-und-soziales/soziales-engagement/berner-sozialpreis-freiwillig-engagiert-gewinner-gewinnerinnen-berner-sozialpreis-2021>

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell\\_ptk/ueberbrueckungshilfe-stadt-bern-startet-pilotprojekt](https://www.bern.ch/mediencenter/medienmitteilungen/aktuell_ptk/ueberbrueckungshilfe-stadt-bern-startet-pilotprojekt)

- ◆ In October 2022, the Bern City Council approved funding in the amount of 120,000 Swiss francs for the City Card.<sup>21</sup> By the end of 2023, the implementation concept (including time frame, cost plan, technical solutions and functions of the card) of the Office for Migration and Racism Issues should be available. The City Card for undocumented migrants is intended to function as part of the digital proof of identity for all citizens of Bern.
- ◆ The sociological preliminary **study** and the legal revision of the Bern City Card from 2020/21 already serve as an orientation framework for the introduction of city cards in other cities, as for example currently in Berlin.
- ◆ The 2021 Social Award was again attributed to a project supporting migrants: the **'Solidaritätsnetz Bern'**<sup>22</sup>, a contact point for migrants in emergency situations, which offers free legal and social counselling to people with precarious residence status.
- ◆ At the beginning of 2023, the city of Bern launched a one-year pilot project, the so called 'Überbrückungshilfe', consisting of low-threshold financial aid for people affected by poverty. In this project, Bern also addresses the particular needs of migrants – with and without legalised residence status.<sup>23</sup>

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The **Moving Cities** project provides an in-depth research of progressive cities in Europe, exploring their most inspiring and successful approaches to migration policies. Find more city reports at [www.moving-cities.eu](http://www.moving-cities.eu).

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