

Bremen

Reducing the number of deportations

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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways:

1

Bremen reduced its number of deportations to well below the national average by instructing the foreigner's registration office to focus on possibilities for granting a residence permit whenever possible.

2

Longstanding anti-racist movements in the city have been active since the 1970s. These have been a main driver of political change, in cooperation with a progressive governing coalition.

What is unique about Bremen?

Successful interplay between politics and social movements: The story of Bremen shows how interactions between political actors and social movements can have positive political-cultural consequences, and are of great importance for the "Solidarity Cities" movement today. It introduced a number of pioneering programs, notably a nation-leading scheme providing better access to healthcare for asylum seekers and undocumented migrants.

What are the most outstanding results so far?

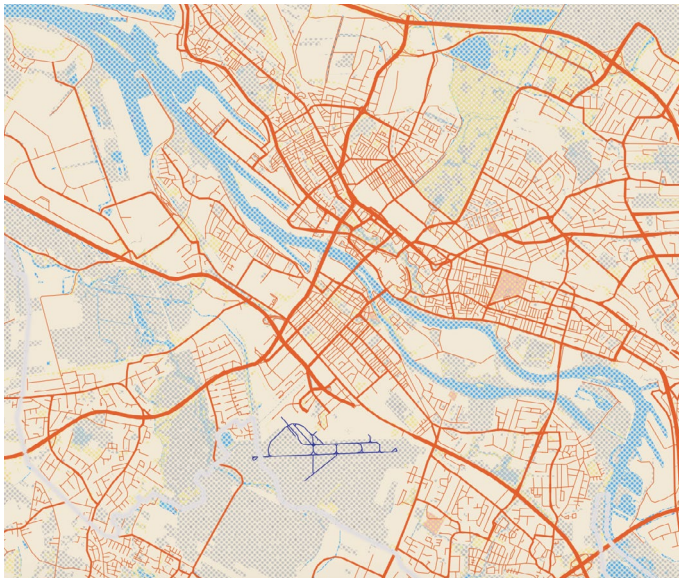
Significantly reduced deportations: From 2010 onward, the foreigners' registration office has been focusing more on the possibilities for granting residence permits than on deportations. As a result, the ratio of deported migrants is significantly below the national average.

What are the key factors?

Anti-racist work pays off: For many years, Bremen has been a place where an active anti-racist civil society has shown direct, political, and practical solidarity with refugees and lobbied the state government to do so as well. It has been able to record increasing success, especially since the Greens joined the state government in 2007.

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

Bremen is an active member of several city networks and joined Solidarity Cities in 2018. That same year, the city also took a public stance against criminalising sea rescue and declared the city a safe harbour for migrants. Bremen also tried to lobby for more inclusive migration policy on a national level. However, due to the small size of the city-state its influence is limited.



Population

567,549

Location

Northwest Germany; Bremen is one of three city-states in Germany

Mayor

Andreas Bovenschulte (SPD/Social Democrats)

2. Local Background and context

Over the last few years, Bremen improved the living conditions for migrants in multiple areas, from better access to healthcare to “humanitarian consultation hours” for undocumented migrants. The key factors in this development are a long standing anti-racist movement which has been active since the 1970s, and a progressive coalition between Social Democrats, Greens and the Left Party since 2007.

Anti-racist movements since the 1970s

Bremen has been a centre of anti-racist movements and self-organized refugee protests since the 1970s. Bremen’s “Reform University,” founded in 1971, contributed to an active political scene and civil society for which anti-racism and the fight against deportation was a main topic. In the early 1990s, hundreds of refugees went on strike against the conditions of their isolated accommodation on the Embrica Marcel housing ship in Bremen’s coal port. Since then, there has been a virtually uninterrupted stream of anti-racist protests, which refugees themselves, have either carried out or supported in various measures. The most recent example is the initiative **Together we are Bremen** which has been advocating as a grassroots initiative for the Solidarity Cities idea since 2019.

A progressive government coalition since 2007

The Social Democrats have governed Bremen since World War II, and are considered to be rather progressive. However, the Senate has, at times, pursued a very harsh deportation policy against which civil society has mobilised strongly. In 2007, the Greens joined the government, and for the first time the Left Party succeeded in entering a West German parliament. Since that time, demands from the anti-racist movement have been increasingly taken up in politics. The relationship with the Senate has also become less confrontational and more dialogue-oriented. There still is, however, strong criticism of state admission policy to this day.

Recent successes

Nevertheless, state politicians have taken up many suggestions for a human rights-oriented policy over the years. The Green Party declared in February 2019 that Bremen has “long since acted in accordance with the many demands of the ‘Solidarity City’ movement and has already implemented many of them.”¹ It cited examples including healthcare, “Education for All,” shelters, facilities for traumatised women, and the “Humanitarian Consultation Hour” for undocumented migrants. Yet Bremen is by no means a place where all arriving people would have equal rights or receive sufficient support according to their needs, as the initiative “Together we are Bremen,” has repeatedly pointed out.

More people can stay in Bremen

As part of the political course correction described above, administrative reforms had a concrete impact on the prospects of the migrant population in Bremen. In 2020, the city-state deported 93 foreigners, or 14.3 per 100,000 inhabitants. This is about half as many as in other German states such as Bavaria for example.²

No more deportations to Afghanistan

Also unlike in other German states (even with Green government participation) deportations to Afghanistan do not take place in Bremen. This was achieved, among other things, by the fact that the responsible migration authorities in Bremen assume that Afghan citizens automatically face obstacles to departure. This results in the right to a residence permit on humanitarian grounds.³ Under current federal law, this approach would also be open to other federal states, but is only practised in Bremen.

Right to education for undocumented families

In order to implement a right to education for undocumented families, Bremen has abolished the obligation for schools to register the residence status of their students and their families. This means that undocumented parents can register their children at regular public schools without having to provide information on their residence status

¹ <https://www.gruene-fraktion-bremen.de/positionspapiere/bremen-ist-bereits-eine-solidarische-stadt/?L=0>

² <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/372394/umfrage/abschiebungen-aus-deutschland-nach-bundeslaendern/>

³ § 25.5 AufenthG

and fearing to be reported to the police. Children of asylum seekers in the state primary reception centre are initially given schooling there. But they are usually placed in regular school classes outside the camp after three months. This is not the case in many other federal states either.

Moreover, since 2014, Bremen has opened access to integration courses to everyone, regardless of their perspective for a long-term stay. The additional costs were initially financed from municipal funds, and since 2019, additionally from the European Social Fund.

Improving access to reception schemes

Bremen also stands out for its efforts to develop local reception programmes to admit more migrants and refugees in the city. With the permission of the Federal Interior Ministry, Bremen and other German states, grant admission to Syrians who have close relatives in Germany. However, Bremen even went further: the city-state also allowed third parties (friends, acquaintances, organisations) to assume the costs for the Syrian relatives and also exempted medical care costs from the obligation. This made it easier for many families to take advantage of the scheme. In 2020, the city government tried to even broaden the reception scheme for Syrian refugees in order to relocate the families of Syrian refugees directly from the camps, as on the Greek islands, and to spare them the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean.⁴ So far their initiative has failed because of the Federal Interior Ministry rejections.

Friendly conditions: Not for everyone!

The relatively humane reception conditions in Bremen however do not apply to everyone. The state repeatedly pushes asylum seekers - even young ones - to other states according to the nationwide distribution key. There they often end up in large, isolated and remote camps with significantly worse conditions. This repeatedly affects young asylum seekers from West Africa, some of whom are driven around Germany for hours in handcuffs by the police.

¹ <https://www.gruene-fraktion-bremen.de/positionspapiere/bremen-ist-bereits-eine-solidarische-stadt/?L=0>

3. Selected local approaches to migration and inclusion policy

3.1. Dissolving the “Team 5” Deportation Department

After repeated critiques by local civil society, the notorious department for deportation - known for its rigorous and sometimes illegal behaviour - was closed in 2010. This marked a turning point in the development of Bremen’s immigration policy and laid an important foundation for the administrative implementation of the “Solidarity Cities” approach.

Deportations at all cost: Team 5

Until December 2010, the local foreigner’s office had its own department for deportations, the so-called “Team 5.” Its staff received case files from colleagues who were responsible for earlier phases of the residence procedure, after requests to leave the country had been issued. They did not know the persons concerned, and they had only one task: to get them out of the country as quickly as possible. Bremen went so far as to mistrust even its own public health officers when checking the ability to travel and preferred to commission external doctors for deportee travel fitness reports.⁵ “Given its mission, the success of Team 5 was measured by the number of deportations carried out,” said Gundula Oerter of the local Refugee Initiative.⁶

Pressure from below

Over the years, local solidarity initiatives documented and scandalised multiple breaches of law by deportation bureaucrats. After years of fierce criticism from local support groups, counseling centers, and dedicated lawyers, “Team 5” was dissolved in 2010 by the Social Democrat Senator of Interior.

Team 5’s dissolution is only one episode in a long history of local anti-racist struggles. But it shows how interactions between politics and social movements can have political consequences, and are of great importance for the “Solidarity Cities” movement today. In Bremen’s past – and even now in other German states – “existing laws were or are applied as hard as possible to the detriment of the refugees,” says Markus Saxinger, who today heads the local network for the right to stay. In Bremen today, not everything works perfectly but “the basic motivation, the attitude” of the foreigner’s department has changed.

⁴ <https://www.senatspressestelle.bremen.de/sixcms/detail.php?id=343870&asl=bremen02.c.732.de>

⁵ <https://taz.de/!5142753/>

⁶ <https://taz.de/!5128298/>

3.2. Healthcare for all

In 2005, Bremen introduced a “health card” for all refugees, allowing them to receive regular medical care within the public healthcare system.

Bremen introduced a “health card” for refugees in 2005. This card does not differ optically from the card for people with regular health insurance. To this end, the Bremen social security authority concluded a contract with a statutory health insurance company (AOK). This allowed refugees to receive regular medical care within the regular system, whereas in other parts of Germany refugees are often treated by “camp doctors” in a separate system.

This is a major improvement for refugees in the ongoing asylum procedure, as well as for undocumented migrants. Since the “asylum compromise” of 1993, the former are only entitled to limited health care. Others are generally not even entitled to this. There are still flaws to the Bremen model which restrict the scope of benefits, for example in the case of chronic treatment or artificial insemination. Nevertheless, the Bremen model was a pioneering achievement in destigmatising refugees within the public healthcare system.

“All those entitled to benefits under the Asylum Seekers Benefits Act have an AOK health card in the state of Bremen and can consult and be treated by doctors on a regular basis. On the one hand, this helps to avoid unnecessarily complex accounting procedures, and on the other hand, it avoids the administrative costs of issuing health insurance vouchers in social or health offices, as is common in other German states,”⁷ writes the Left parliamentary group.

Regular medical consultations

Additionally, the Bremen Health Office has been offering regular medical consultations and basic care by doctors from the Migration and Health Department since 2009. It is open two hours a day, two days a week and is aimed at undocumented migrants without health insurance. It is free of charge and anonymous on request. Until 2017, around 20,000 euro were provided by the city per year for the project, which was not enough for all the undocumented migrants in Bremen. This is probably one of the reasons for staff shortages and restrictions on opening hours. In 2018, the city increased the budget to 100,000 euro per year. The additional funds were to be used, for example, to cover costs for pregnant women in order to receive care from established gynaecologists, and for interpreting services. Nevertheless, undocumented migrants are still dependent on doctors who would provide additional treatment free of charge, mediated by the initiative Medinetz Bremen.⁸

Next Steps: Healthcare for all

For this reason, in their 2019 coalition agreement the local government committed to make health care “accessible to all people in Bremen,

⁷ <https://www.linksfraktion-bremen.de/presse/pressemitteilungen/presse-detail/news/anonyme-gesundheitskarte-auch-fuer-papierlose-menschen/> (Retrieved in 2021)

⁸ <http://www.fluechtlingsinitiative-bremen.de/?q=medinetz>

regardless of their status.”⁹ In order to “ensure specialist medical care nationwide and to guarantee extensive integration into standard care,” an “anonymous health card” is to be introduced for people without residence rights, similar to the “Bremen model” for asylum seekers.

Two concrete forms are being discussed. In the first case, the card would contain anonymised data, apart from the passport photograph, because otherwise those without residence rights might fear they would be reported to foreigner authorities and the health card would not be used by its target group. A less far-reaching model would give undocumented migrants a one-time health card with anonymised data during the humanitarian consultation at the Health Office. This would enable them to have the costs of a particular treatment covered, with a free choice of doctor in principle. In October 2019, the local parliament commissioned the Senate to develop a model. In both cases, this would be a novelty nationwide.

3.3 Residence permits for young migrants

In order to overcome the so-called “chain-toleration,” which leaves thousands of refugees in uncertainty about their long-term staying perspective, Bremen introduced the “Bremen Decree” in 2010. Young migrants can now apply for a residence permit if they are “socially and economically integrated.”

In Germany, people who apply for asylum and who are denied refugee status are “tolerated” to stay in the country until they can be deported. As in many cases the government cannot deport them due to lack of passport, unclear identity, a war in their home country, or a medical condition. This group, which comprises tens of thousands of people nationwide, often lives in limbo and a largely lawless state for years. Minors, whose only obstacle to deportation was their age, have often been deported directly after their 18th birthday, even if they were in school or vocational training.

In order to overcome this, Bremen introduced the “Bremen Decree” in 2010. The city-state has been considered a pioneer in creating legal residence prospects for young refugees. “For humanitarian reasons,” migrants previously tolerated in Bremen have since been able to apply for a residence permit if they were “socially and economically integrated.” The proof of four years of schooling in Germany, language skills, and no criminal record was thus their ticket to a residence permit. This has been unreachable for teens in similar conditions in other federal states. At the time, this was a major step forward. It was the first model for a right of residence for the “tolerated” migrants.

In 2011, however, the new Section 25a of the Residence Act passed by the federal parliament (“Bundestag”) stipulates that authorities nationwide could grant residence status if integration is “good,” albeit under stricter conditions. The period of required school attendance was set at six years. In Bremen however, four years is still enough, and parents were able to submit an application for their children after they turned ten. The federal law only allows applications from 15 to 21 year-olds.

⁹ <https://www.spd-land-bremen.de/Dokumente-und-Materialien.html>

In October 2020, Bremen made progress once again, allowing tolerated persons “with special integration benefits” to be granted a residence permit. Young adults up to the age of 26 can now also be granted a residence permit after four years of residence if they can show that they have:

- ◆ Sufficient knowledge of German (level B1) or adequate knowledge of German (level A2) + the German mark “satisfactory” on a school report from a German school
- ◆ Successfully attended a German school for four years, or have acquired a school degree, or are completing vocational training, studies, or a state-subsidised vocational preparation measure

The neighbouring state Schleswig-Holstein, put forward similar plans in the Bundesrat in 2018. There, the Bundesrat rejected the bill and thus did not submit it to the Bundestag. Hence, Bremen is again in a pioneering role with its new state decree. “It covers unaccompanied minor refugees and guarantees them a right to stay if they finish school,” says Markus Saxinger of the Bremen Integration Network. “Such a principle does not exist elsewhere.”

4. Advocacy and network activities

EUROCITIES

In 2017, a civil society initiative (“Solidarity City Bremen”¹⁰) was formed, which demanded that Bremen should “join the chain of cities of solidarity and human rights.” The Grüne (Greens), which have been co-governing the city since 2007 with the Social Democrats, took up the suggestion and brought it to the attention of Green-led city council departments in summer 2018. This was primarily the Social Affairs department, which is also responsible for integration. In November 2018, the Senator for Social Affairs drafted a resolution¹¹ declaring Bremen’s accession to the Solidarity Cities network within the EUROCITIES framework. The Senate formally and unanimously adopted it on 11 December, 2018.

The resolution noted that Bremen had been using legal scope for refugee integration for a long time. The accession to the Solidarity Cities network reaffirms this line. This commitment is in response to German society’s rightward shift after 2015 without explicitly naming it (“current socio-political developments”), and is intended to underscore Bremen’s commitment to an “open and free society.” At the same time, it points out that professional exchange among European municipalities committed to a sustainable integration policy can help with local admission policies.

¹⁰ <http://solidarity-city-bremen.org/>

¹¹ <https://www.transparenz.bremen.de/sixcms/detail.php?gsid=bremen69.c.75983.de&asl=bremen02.c.732.de>

Joining Solidarity Cities: a strong symbol

Both official and civil society representatives see Bremen’s accession to the Solidarity Cities network in 2018 mainly as an “expression and com-

mitment” to existing progressive admissions policy rather than as its starting point. “It is not that accession has triggered concrete initiatives, it has rather become part of a political stance and served to symbolically express this publicly once again,” says Merle Bielinski, responsible for the project in the Social Senator’s office. Also Markus Saxinger from the local Bleiberechtsnetzwerk (Network for the Right to stay) sees “rather symbolic declarative value.” This declaration rather “stands for certain political constants” he says.

Against the criminalisation of sea rescue

In response to the debate on the reception of refugees from the Mediterranean in the summer of 2018, Bremen’s governing Social Democrats and Greens, together with the then-opposition Socialists (Linke) introduced a resolution in the state parliament named “Saving human lives is not a crime!”¹² It demanded that the state of Bremen, as the seat of the non-governmental German Society for the Rescue of Shipwrecked Persons (DGzRS), should declare its willingness to accept people from sea rescue ships. Bremen parliament officially condemned “any criminalisation of sea rescue” and “declares itself ready to accept people rescued from sea distress” in the state of Bremen.

Three weeks later, the mayors of Bremen, Hamburg, and Berlin – the three German city-states – jointly assured their cities would remain “safe harbours for refugees”¹³ and promised “to do everything possible to save people from drowning, to bring refugee ships to safe harbours and to accept refugees in Europe according to the rules of European and national asylum law”.

Shortly after the state election in May 2019, the newly elected mayor Andreas Bovenschulte, a Social Democrat who formed a coalition with the Socialists (Linke) and Greens (a so-called “Red-Red-Green” or “R2G” coalition), reaffirmed that Bremen would remain “a safe harbour.”¹⁴ However, he pointed out that the Federal Interior Ministry had not yet asked the state of Bremen to admit additional refugees.

¹² https://paris.bremische-buergerschaft.de/starweb/paris/servlet.starweb?path=paris/LISSHFL.web&format=LISSH_MoreDokument_Report&search=WP=19+AND+DN-R=1792+AND+DART=d (Retrieved in 2021)

¹³ <https://www.senatspressestelle.bremen.de/detail.php?gsid=bremen146.c.306825.de&asl=bremen02.c.732.de>

¹⁴ <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/andreas-bovenschulte-designierter-spd-buergermeister-nennt-bremen-sicheren-hafen-a-1276381.html> (Retrieved in 2021)

Update: What is new in 2023?

- ◆ Since September 2022, migrants in Bremen without documentation are receiving medical treatment in the regular health care system. The project is run by doctors from the “Association for the Promotion of Medical and Health Care for Uninsured and Paperless People in Bremen” (MVP) and funded by the city of Bremen which thus ensures the full implementation of the human right to health care.¹⁵
- ◆ The local government also initiated a pilot project to offer counselling for undocumented migrants and to help them find a way out of illegalisation and precarity in May 2023. The so-called “Clearingstelle” is run by the German Red Cross and is considered unique and the first of its kind nationwide.¹⁶
- ◆ At the election of the local parliament in May 2023, the city mayor and his center-left coalition was confirmed in office. However, the increase in voters for the right-wing populist party ‘Citizens in Rage’ (2023: approx. 9%) could complicate the city’s progressive initiatives for migrants. Closeby in Bremerhaven, (Bremen’s ‘sister city’), the right-wing populists even became the second strongest force with a vote of 22.7%.

¹⁵ <https://taz.de/Bremerinnen-ohne-Krankenversicherung!/5888942/>

¹³ <https://www.senatspressestelle.bremen.de/pressemitteilungen/senat-startet-pilotprojekt-fuer-papierlose-420940?asl=bremen02.c.732.de>

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.

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