

Rottenburg

The small town influencing German migration policy

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1. Abstract & Takeaways

Key Takeaways:

1

Rottenburg stands out through the sustainable civic engagement structures it set up during the summer of 2015, which continue now.

2

Despite its relatively small size, Rottenburg has been a driving actor in establishing a solidarity city network in both Germany and Europe. It also takes a visible public stance against existing migration policies.

What is unique about the city?

Bringing together Cities of Safe Harbours: Rottenburg, a small town in one of the richest regions in Germany, made national news when Mayor Stephan Neher vociferously advocated for the direct admission of refugees from the Mediterranean. In summer 2019, he offered: “If it comes down to it, I’ll call a bus operator in my town afterwards, and he’ll go to Italy and pick up the people.” Since then, Rottenburg has taken a leading role in networking municipalities nationwide to welcome refugees, and in taking over management of the “Cities of Safe Harbours” network from the much larger Potsdam.

What are the key factors?

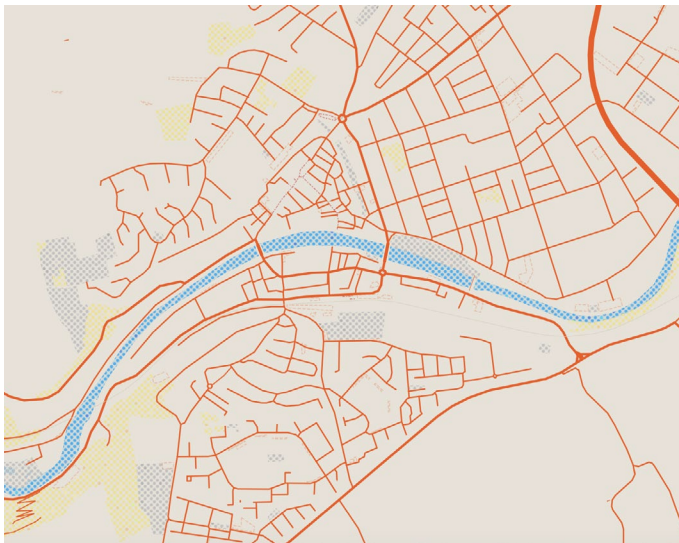
A vocal mayor and a strong civil society: Rottenburg itself draws on strong civil society welcoming structures that formed locally after 2015. It emerged as one of the most important voices in the movement for community refugee reception in Germany, through the mayor’s numerous public interventions. These interventions gained national attention not least because Rottenburg is governed by a conservative party. As a politician of the Christian Democrats Party, Neher was able to influence the debate in a different way than cities governed by the left.

What are the most outstanding results so far?

Combining local engagement and advocacy work: Rottenburg successfully combined local engagement and policy innovation with advocacy work on a national and even international level. Locally, Rottenburg proved how civic engagement can become an integral part of municipal integration strategies, by formalising the civic solidarity that emerged in summer 2015. Rottenburg also helped set up several national and international city networks advocating for more municipal autonomy in refugee policy.

Political activities and advocacy beyond the city level?

At the centre of German and European municipal networking: Despite its relatively small size, Rottenburg has been a driving actor in establishing a network of solidarity cities in Germany. In September 2019, Rottenburg hosted the network's first working meeting, which by then dozens of other municipalities had joined. In June 2021, Rottenburg was one of the municipalities that helped organise the first European Cities Conference on Refugee Reception in Palermo "From the City to the Sea." Mayor Neher himself spoke out publicly on many occasions in favour of a special distribution key for cities willing to take in refugees.



Population

43,843

Location/ region

West Germany;
in the federal state of Baden-Württemberg

Mayor (party)

Stephan Neher (CDU)

2. Local background and context

Rottenburg stands out because it successfully established sustainable structures as a reaction to the summer of migration in 2015. The structures are still in place today. A proactive mayor and a growing network of civil society initiatives that quickly and pragmatically reacted to the new situation have been the main factors, enabling the community to make itself heard nationwide despite its small size.

Baden-Württemberg has traditionally been governed by the conservative CDU for a long time. In recent years, however, there has been a significant shift in the regional party system. The left-liberal Greens became the strongest force, while at the same time the far-right AfD achieved an uncharacteristically strong result for western Germany, winning around 10 percent of votes in the state in the last federal election in 2017.

Clear anti-racist positioning of the municipal council

It was shortly before Christmas 2015 when two women from Gambia were harassed and beaten up by a drunk Neo-Nazi in Rottenburg.¹ Passers-by helped the women, yet both got injured, one even required surgery. The mayor of Rottenburg, local council parties, and church congregations called for a rally two days later, named “Rottenburg against the far right.” “Please bring a candle to the rally,” the mayor asked.² Around 2,000 people responded to the call.

The municipal council took this as an opportunity to make it clear that refugees should have their place in the prosperous southern German municipality. In a resolution,³ it called on the mayor to examine the extent to which internships and apprenticeships could be offered to refugees in municipal agencies. Local companies should be encouraged to do the same. In this way, “prejudices can be reduced, language skills can be developed, and social integration can be accelerated,” the municipal council stated. All initiatives, churches and associations should “further develop and intensify activities for the rapid integration of refugees in our city,” the council demanded.

A swift reaction to the summer of migration in 2015

Nine months later, about one million refugees arrived in Germany via the “Balkan route.” The municipality of Rottenburg had to take in some of them. In line with its population, a total of 590⁴ refugees had been redistributed to Rottenburg a few months later. The small city had to set up not less than 20 sites for housing refugees. “Now, more or less overnight, this enormously difficult refugee situation has come very close to us,”⁵ Mayor Stephan Neher wrote at the time. Within a few hours, it had become necessary to set up an emergency reception facility in an empty hall “while hundreds of refugees were already on the train heading for Baden-Württemberg,” he wrote.

It paid off that many in the city had apparently taken the local council’s call from the previous winter seriously. The people of Rottenburg donated money for the new arrivals. But it was not to stop there. In a very short time, a large number of support initiatives were formed and later on, unlike in many other cities, institutionally-supported and coordinated by the local administration.

The municipality realised early on, that caring for the refugees and integrating them would keep them busy for a long time. It also recognised that integration would only succeed if it made use of the citizens’ willingness to help.

City and citizens working together

“Now that the structures for the most necessary things for daily operations at the emergency reception centre have been created, it is a matter of, on the one hand, supporting the organisations with additional volunteers and, on the other hand, making it easier for people to arrive,”

¹ <https://www.schwarz-waelder-bote.de/inhalt.rottenburg-neonazi-muss-drei-jahre-ins-gefaengnis.4381f6e4-d538-4c77-9fe3-d0b126620a6e.html>

² <https://www.rottenburg.de/six-cms/detail.php?id=87288&Inav=14>

³ <https://www.rottenburg.de/fluechtlingshilfe+braucht+ehrenamt.92873.htm?Inav=14>

⁴ <https://www.schwarz-waelder-bote.de/inhalt.rottenburg-der-grosse-fluechtlingsstrom-laesst-fuer-rottenburg-spuerbar-nach.9bdee14a-3647-4969-9c05-6de720f6b5f8.html>

⁵ <https://www.rottenburg.de/fluechtlingshilfe+braucht+ehrenamt.92873.htm?Inav=14>

the mayor wrote on 18 September 2015. He pointed to an array of opportunities to get actively involved, for example, in serving meals, caring for the children, teaching German, and assisting in talks with authorities.⁶ The wave of willingness to help was enormous at that time, he stated. “It is so important, however, that the voluntary commitment remains active even in a few weeks’ time.” Due to the difficult situation worldwide, it “is not foreseeable how long more people will seek refuge with us,” he finished.

As early as January 2016—the movement via the “Balkan route” was still in full swing. The municipal council created the position of an Integrationsbeauftragter (Integration officer), later renamed “refugee coordinator.” Their main task was to promote the commitment of numerous volunteers. He invited people who wanted to get involved in this area to come to the town hall for personal counselling sessions “to present their wishes and ideas in order to find a suitable assignment together”⁷ – a service that was probably unparalleled even in those days.

The German Red Cross in Rottenburg created the possibility “to get involved according to your personal time budget and your own interests.” Those who joined the DRK in Rottenburg on short notice were insured during their time as refugee helpers.

In order to be able to channel the Rottenburgers willingness to help, the municipality set up a questionnaire⁸ on which all those willing to get involved were asked to indicate on which days they were available to help and in which of eleven possible areas they were to be deployed. Everything from “welcoming culture” to “bicycle repair shop” to “intercultural garden” was on offer. More than 80 volunteers participated.

From spontaneous support to sustainable structures

The coordinator offered further training, partly directly, partly together with the district of Tübingen. This covered everything from lectures on dealing with traumatised refugees, an introduction to asylum law and asylum procedures, topics like “support work with refugees,” “job mentor training,” or “What to do after the rejection of the asylum application?”

Their work was later supplemented with ten professional “integration managers,” funded by the district. The “integration managers” were subsequently deployed in Rottenburg, primarily in shared accommodations. Their task is to “strengthen independence.” The integration managers worked out goals with the refugees, for example on their professional situation or language acquisition. Other areas of counselling included the stay in Germany, the housing situation, health, language, work and career, finances and family. One of the most important goals was to find a regular job for the individual refugees.

The efforts paid off in that the work of the city’s support scene became more stable and diversified. For example, in order to assist refugees and other vulnerable groups to find a flat, Rottenburg participates in the national “Raumteiler” (room divider) project. For this purpose, a munic-

⁶ <https://www.rottenburg.de/fluechtlingshilfe+braucht+ehrenamt.92873.htm?Inav=14>

⁷ <https://www.rottenburg.de/ehrenamtliche+angebote+in+der+fluechtlingshilfe.91374.htm?Inav=14>

⁸ <https://www.rottenburg.de/ehrenamt+in+der+fluechtlingshilfe+fragebogenaktion.93182.htm?Inav=14>

ipal coordinator at the public order office is available to landlords and volunteers as a contact person. And even though the number of newly arriving refugees has dropped sharply, as is the case everywhere in Germany, the municipality and civil society are maintaining the support infrastructure and are thus well prepared for new arrivals.

The permanent support structures would hardly have been possible on the basis of purely voluntary work. Here, it has paid off that the municipality has created a unique paid position in the form of the Welcome Culture Coordinator, who is the permanent contact person for civil society and can coordinate its activities.

List of local NGOs

- ◆ **Raumteiler:** Sharing living space in Rottenburg. The city of Rottenburg supports home and apartment owners in their search for suitable tenants, thus helping people who would otherwise have little chance on the open housing market.
- ◆ **Language Café:** At the Language Café, volunteers offer language learning support every Wednesday from 5:30 to 7:00 pm. From intensive individual support to casual group conversation, everything is possible that promotes language skills.
- ◆ **Sponsorship model** (see 4.1): The sponsors support refugees in various ways, determining autonomously the scope of their commitment. However, the offer is coordinated by the municipality.
- ◆ **Garden of Encounter:** In the Garden of Encounter, people can garden together every week under professional guidance.
- ◆ **Cafè International:** Café International offers games for young refugees every week at the Klaus Youth Centre.
- ◆ **Bicycle Workshop:** Every week, refugees can repair their bicycles under expert guidance together with volunteers. Along the way, donated bicycles are refurbished.

3. Selected local approaches to migration and inclusion policy

3.1 Volunteer mentoring project: Paten

By establishing a mentoring programme based upon the work of volunteers, Rottenburg proved that civic engagement can become a part of sustainable integration measures. The idea is simple: The city facilitates mentoring relationships by matching volunteers with refugees and by offering supervision throughout the process. The project started in 2015 and still exists today. Its success put Rottenburg in a stronger position to intervene in migration discourses, even on a national level.

Since 2014, there has been a project in Rottenburg that brought together refugees and volunteers on a 1:1 basis. It was called “Tandem” and was originally initiated by the local Volkshochschule (adult education centre). After 2015, Rottenburg established its own mentoring programme. The most important tool for integrating newcomers is genuine social contact. For this reason, among others, the state often goes to great lengths to separate refugees in camps from the majority of society in order to facilitate later deportations. Projects like the Rottenburg sponsorship model try to structurally break through this isolation and institutionally anchor individual willingness to help.

After the number of arriving refugees rose sharply in the summer of 2015, the city of Rottenburg launched its own mentoring project. At that time, about 30⁹ full-time social workers were on duty for almost 600¹⁰ refugees. In terms of weekly working hours, this probably amounted to little more than 1.5 hours of attention per person per week.

This was one of the reasons why the city administration, namely the “Refugee Coordinator,” was looking for interested people who wanted to help people arrive in the city beyond the numerous existing group activities, on a rather individual level.¹¹

Integration through mentoring

“Shelter and food were only the first steps in helping. For a good coexistence and successful integration, the refugees need our support in many aspects of life,”¹² the municipality wrote in an appeal. The mentors could provide support in learning German, helping children with their homework, supporting refugees in finding housing and jobs, accompanying them when they go to the authorities, spending their free time together or providing everyday assistance. For these activities, the municipality offered the volunteers liability and accident insurance coverage.

In its call, the municipality particularly encouraged young people, schoolchildren, and students, to help their peers with learning German, or with schoolwork in general.

⁹ <https://www.neckar-chronik.de/Nachrichten/Kulturelle-Bruecken-bauen-306924.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.schwarzwaelder-bote.de/inhalt/rottenburg-der-grosse-fluechtlingsstrom-laesst-fuer-rottenburg-spuerbar-nach.9bdee14a-3647-4969-9c05-6de720f6b5f8.html>

¹¹ <https://www.rottenburg.de/paten+fuer+fluechtlinge.99820.htm?lnav=14>

¹² <https://www.rottenburg.de/patenschaften+fuer+fluechtlinge.106462.htm?lnav=14>

Interested parties had to fill out a questionnaire. In it, the future volunteers had to provide their personal data, along with their occupation, hobbies, foreign language skills, and the amount of time they expected to be able to invest.

The coordinator invited the potential mentors to city hall for interviews to gather more detailed information for “matching,” as the municipality stated. The coordinator handed the information over to social workers at the regional district office, who in turn were asked to suggest where the need was greatest and which refugee would be a good match with the mentors. They were then brought together with the mentors for an initial casual conversation, generally in “neutral” places like a café.

A prerequisite for the assignment as a mentor was to provide an extended certificate of good legal conduct. This was to prevent possible assaults against the refugees. After all, some of them were adolescents. The certificate of good conduct in this case costs nothing; the city council pays the fee.

How to enable good mentoring relationships

In order not to set the hurdles too high, the municipality made it clear that mentoring does not automatically mean that one has to support the refugees “in all circumstances.”¹³ Many sponsors would join forces with other people and thus accompany refugees collectively. This means less time commitment for the individual. On the other hand, the coordinator also warned against the idea that mentoring would just mean going for a walk together. “These people have serious problems that need to be solved.”¹⁴ However, the mentors should not relieve the refugees of things like dealing with the authorities or looking for an apartment. The sponsors are “only helpers and companions,”¹⁵ the coordinator made clear.

The mentors themselves should also be able to call on help. If, for example, they need an interpreter in certain situations, they are able to request one through the district office. The city organised regular mentor meetings and information events to support the volunteers in their task. It also offered supervision¹⁶ for them. The mentor model was accompanied by a group of experienced volunteers. At regular meetings once a quarter, the mentors are able to exchange information with each other, as well as getting further training.

¹³ <https://www.rottenburg.de/paten+fuer+fluechtlinge.99820.htm?lnav=14>

¹⁴ <https://www.neckar-chronik.de/Nachrichten/Kulturelle-Bruecken-bauen-306924.html>

¹⁵ <https://www.neckar-chronik.de/Nachrichten/Kulturelle-Bruecken-bauen-306924.html>

¹⁶ [https://www.engagiert-im-kreis-tuebingen.de/5.0.html?&tx_ehrenamtsuche_pi1\[-show\]=436](https://www.engagiert-im-kreis-tuebingen.de/5.0.html?&tx_ehrenamtsuche_pi1[-show]=436)

¹⁷ <https://www.neckar-chronik.de/Nachrichten/Stadt-Rottenburg-und-Landkreis-wollen-private-Hilfe-mit-Patenschaftsmodell-staerken-305192.html>

“If there’s a pitfall, it’s that people overtax themselves with this task,”¹⁷ Wolfgang Jüngling, the Flüchtlingskoordinator said in the local newspaper during the initial period of the project. “You have to think about how much time and energy you want to invest beforehand.” If there are ever problems, Jüngling assured, “we don’t leave anyone out in the cold. We always have an open ear.”

By the end of the year 2016, around 50 interested people had come forward to become mentors. The city administration and the district council invited them. The meeting in Rottenburg’s town hall in December 2016 was the starting point for a network of sponsorships and professional support for the volunteers. The city undertook to promote the model on

a permanent basis. The mayor at the time, Volker Bednarz, announced that the city would increasingly advertise the partnership model in the future. In doing so, the city of Rottenburg wants to counter “those who are igniting in the country,” said Bednarz. The project continues today. Municipalities that support local refugee admissions are often told by higher political levels that they are keeping their own morale high at other people’s expense—in the end, it is usually the federal government that pays for the admissions. The fact that a municipality like Rottenburg is willing to help in such a sustainable way, puts it in a position to intervene at the national level in the first place. It has already proven that it can actually provide for refugees with its own resources and has thus also made itself capable of discursive intervention.

3.2 Neustart im Team

Cities from the Solidarity Cities movement deal differently with the fact that municipalities do not yet have a say in additional refugee intakes. Rottenburg has chosen—among other strategies—to participate vigorously in a project for privately-sponsored refugee admission. This was an important political signal for further debates on municipal reception, as it showed commitment and political will are there and will be used in every possible way.

In October 2020, the municipality of Rottenburg¹⁸ called on its citizens to participate in the project “Neustart im Team”¹⁹ (“NesT). Volunteers from civil society were being sought who would form a mentor group of at least five people to accompany a refugee or a refugee family in their integration over a period of two years. “Neustart im Team”²⁰ (“NesT) is a pilot project launched in 2019 by the German Federal Interior Ministry and the UN refugee agency UNHCR. Before the refugees arrive, a group of at least five mentors has to find them an apartment based on the local welfare rate. The group pays in advance—out of their own pocket—the cold rent for two years into a separate account. In addition, the group undertakes to support the refugee in dealing with the authorities, and with integration.

Unlike the so-called “refugee guarantees,” which burdens the entire reception costs on private guarantors, the “NesT” mentors know from the beginning exactly how much they must contribute financially. The state bears the remaining costs of admission, especially social benefits and insurance.

The “NesT” refugees do not have to apply for asylum in Germany, but are accepted under the so-called “resettlement” program. The city of Rottenburg and the district of Tübingen support the volunteers in various ways. The municipality, for example, would help with the search for housing, while the district would support the volunteer work within the framework of “integration management.” These are refugee social workers paid by the state of Baden-Württemberg. In the case of financial bottlenecks, the NesT mentors would have the possibility to apply for grants.

¹⁸ <https://www.rottenburg.de/neustart+im+team+in+foveranstaltung+am+22+oktober.120718.htm?lnav=1>

¹⁹ <https://www.neustartimteam.de/>

²⁰ <https://www.neustartimteam.de/>

Even though the NesT program is formally not aimed at municipalities

but at individuals, it does offer an opportunity to municipalities willing to take in people. This is because, unlike the frequently demanded evacuation from the EU external border camps, the NesT program is supported by the Federal Interior Ministry.

In 2019, Minister of State for Integration Annette Widmann-Maunz met Rottenburg's mayor Stephan Neher and the refugee representative of the diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart, Ludwig Rudloff, for a discussion about the rescue of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea. She called the resettlement program an important building block so that people who urgently need protection do not have to make the dangerous journey in the first place. The NesT program, she said, provides a new framework for the many local communities and volunteers willing to help. They would be supported in this by municipal integration officers, volunteer coordinators, or migration counselling centres. This is a "strong sign of solidarity in action," "Widmann-Maunz stated.

On 22 October 2020, the city council of Rottenburg, together with the local Caritas organised an information event via video. Widmann-Maunz joined the video conference and informed interested Rottenburg residents once again about the NesT project. The extent to which Rottenburg was also involved in this area can be seen in the appearance of Mayor Stephan Neher at the UNHCR technical meeting on the NesT project at the beginning of May 2021. The local NesT group had been participating in UNHCR training since 2020 and planned to submit the formal application for refugee admission to the BAMF in July 2021. The NesT program successfully withstood the pilot phase and was made permanent at the beginning of 2023. Individual framework criteria have changed: The "hurdles" for the mentoring program have been lowered. Now the group of mentors only has to consist of at least four people (previously at least five people). In addition, the mentoring group must now only pay the net rent for one year (originally two years).

4. Advocacy and network activities

Despite its relatively small size, Rottenburg has been a driving actor in establishing a network of solidarity cities in Germany. In September 2019, Rottenburg hosted the first working meeting of the network, which by then had been joined by dozens of other municipalities. Remarkably, the network is made up of many municipalities with populations well over 100,000, whose administrations have correspondingly greater resources than little Rottenburg.

Shortly before Christmas 2018, a resident of Rottenburg, the management consultant Friedhold Ulonska, addressed a letter to mayor Stephan Neher. Ulonska has been captain or officer on eleven missions by private sea rescue ships in the Mediterranean since 2016, including on the "Sea Eye" and the "Lifeline." Ulonska drew Neher's attention to the concept of safe havens.

Neher took up the issue in the following months, and as early as January

2019, Neher himself introduced an application²¹ to the municipal council, which adopted it unanimously. The motion provided for a voluntary commitment to engage in political lobbying for this purpose vis-à-vis the federal government. The Federal Interior Ministry was to be proactively made aware of local readiness to receive refugees.

Neher spoke at the Seebrücke congress “Leinen Los für kommunale Aufnahme” in June 2019 at the Rotes Rathaus in Berlin and announced there that, if necessary, he would have refugees picked up from Italy by a “local bus operator.”²² At the same time, Rottenburg was one of the first eight cities and municipalities to sign the “Potsdam Declaration” on the occasion of the congress.²³ In a meeting in September 2019 hosted by Rottenburg, a paper was adopted that also formulated the expectation that the federal government would “show the municipalities ways to implement their offer.” It also called for “adequate financial and organisational support” for municipal reception.

Rottenburg’s mayor Neher himself honoured the commitment made in the January council resolution, and spoke out publicly on many²⁴ occasions.²⁵ “It is not acceptable for Europe that people have to camp under plastic sheets and horrible hygiene conditions,” he wrote, for example, about the situation in the Aegean. In June 2020, on World Refugee Day, Neher participated in the conference “From the Sea to the City.”²⁶ The goal here was to establish a Europe-wide network in which civil society organisations, social movements, and mayors of European cities, among others, to make their voices heard by EU institutions on refugee policy. In June 2021, Rottenburg was one of the municipalities that helped organise the first European Cities Conference on Refugee Reception in Palermo “From the City to the Sea.” Shortly before, Mayor Neher pointed out in Germany’s largest daily newspaper that it was “disappointing” that more than 230 German municipalities and 90 cities had joined the “Cities Safe Havens” network, but that the Federal Interior Ministry, led by Neher’s own CDU/CSU party, continued to refuse to agree to a distribution and reception key for cities willing to take in refugees. Neher announced that he would continue to build pressure through the state governments and the Bundesrat, and said that a joint initiative of European municipalities could also be a way forward. After all, “also in Italy” many cities do not agree with the “deterrence policy,” he stated.

²¹ http://bi.rottenburg.de/vo0050.php?__kvonr=2981&voselect=1187

²² https://twitter.com/_Seebruecke_/status/1139482742901628928

²³ <https://www.potsdam.de/potsdamer-erklaerung-der-staedte-sicherer-haefen>

²⁴ <https://www.dgb-bildungswerk.de/migration/leben-zu-bewahren-ist-pflicht-kommentar-von-stephan-neher>

²⁵ <https://kommunal.de/aktion-seebr%C3%BCcke>

²⁶ <https://fromseacity.eu/>

5. Update: What is new in 2023?

- ◆ Rottenburg showed solidarity in 2022 as a member of the Cities Safe Harbours Alliance with cities where the increased reception of refugees from Ukraine is concentrated. For example, the head of the regional coordination of the Cities of Safe Harbours Alliance organised empty bus trips to Berlin to pick up refugees there, thus relieving the capital as a hub.²⁷ The municipality calls on its citizens to make refugees aware, also through private channels, that Rottenburg is a safe harbour for them.
- ◆ The Rottenburg Integration Advisory Board (Integrationsbeirat) initiated a long-term educational project on sea rescue and colonialism in schools in the summer of 2022, with the aim of creating awareness of the life-threatening situation of refugees.²⁸ The Integrationsbeirat is an advisory body consisting of committed citizens of the city of Rottenburg, the majority of whom have their own migration history. It works to improve the living conditions of people with a migration history, regardless of their residence status and length of stay. Since 2022, it has also been represented at the state level in the 'Landesverband der kommunalen Migrantenvertretungen Baden-Württemberg' (LAKA).²⁹

²⁷ <https://www.rottenburg.de/ukraine+fluechtlinge+durchleiten+in+andere+regionen.129238.htm?Inav=1>

²⁸ <https://www.rottenburg.de/kolonialismus+und+seenotrettung.131236.htm?Inav=14>

²⁹ <https://www.rottenburg.de/rottenburger+integrationsbeirat+auf+landesebene+vertreten.130123.htm?Inav=14>

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