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# – GOVERNING MIGRATION THROUGH SMALL TOWNS: Dispersal and the Production of Spaces of Transit

RENE KREICHAUF

## Abstract

*Based on qualitative long-term fieldwork conducted in a peripherally located small town in East Germany, this article compares the dispersal of repatriates from the former Soviet Union with that of recent refugee arrivals. It shows that in this small town the dispersal and local governance of refugees builds on previous approaches to dealing with repatriates. Such approaches repeatedly result in cycles of localized distribution and subsequent small-scale segregation, short-term integration activities, the detachment of both groups from the town and, finally, migrants' subsequent outmigration and relocation to other (mostly larger) cities. To make sense of this path dependency in terms of its specific patterns and characteristics, and to explore the relationships between dispersal, local policy framings, and in- and outmigration to and from small towns, I apply a studying through dispersal approach. This approach reveals that dispersal is an important factor in making and unmaking local migration policies. It can turn small towns into productive sites for migration governance, often transforming them into mere waiting zones and transit spaces. This not only continues migrants' experiences of displacement but also impacts on the image of the small town, where migrants themselves may not want to reside permanently.*

## Introduction

In some European countries, national dispersal policies dictate the initial location and settlement of migrants—particularly refugees. This has resulted in the deflection of migrants from urban areas and cities to rural regions and small towns, for which this distribution migration is often the major, if not the only, source of immigration (Proietti and Veneri, 2019). Because dispersal is a 'no choice' policy for both dispersed migrants and receiving towns, they become the 'backdrop to political actions, decisions and exclusions practiced elsewhere' (Darling, 2017: 183). Recent scholarship suggests that outward and onward migration are not only the likely outcomes of dispersal; they also significantly affect smaller and rural municipalities, particularly those that experience peripheralization processes (De Hoon *et al.*, 2020; Phillimore, 2020). Gauci (2020: 32) finds that many dispersed migrants 'do not wish to stay in small cities', only 'residing in the relevant city for the duration of reception services and allowances ... and then moving to other parts of the country (often larger cities)'. Thus, in small towns under dispersal policies, the likelihood of temporary residence and onward migration is significantly higher compared with urban areas. These conditions create dilemmas. Small towns have to navigate the circumstances of forcefully, and often only temporarily, becoming new migrant destinations, in which migrants have to involuntarily reside, experience restrictions to their movement, and in many cases move on once they are allowed to pursue their residential preferences and migratory projects.

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In this article, I focus on the tensions that dispersal creates in small towns, analyzing the ramifications of dispersal for local policymaking and civil society engagement, and for the experiences, movements and trajectories of migrants, especially when they are dispersed to areas of existing social deprivation and limited economic opportunities (Phillimore, 2020). While some scholars have explored the consequences of dispersal to small towns (e.g. Wren, 2003; Larsen, 2011; Herslund, 2021), the ‘complexities of dispersal as an *experience* as much as a *governmental process* have been left largely unexplored’ (Darling, 2017: 183, emphasis added). With regard to the aspect of governance, dispersal remains overlooked even in several recent studies on the development of local migration policies (see, e.g., Schammann *et al.*, 2021) as an important factor in making and unmaking migration policies (Castles, 2004) across and in different local contexts, but most notably in small towns and rural areas. Little is known about how national dispersal and placement dictate and frame the making of local policies and civil society practices in small towns, or about dispersal policies’ relations to broader restructuring processes of rural areas. In terms of dispersal as an experience, scholars are concerned with the impact of dispersal on migrants’ experiences of homemaking (Van Liempt and Miellet, 2020), access to housing (Gardesse and Lelévrier, 2020) or their (further) residential trajectories (Weidinger, 2021), but most of these observations are one-sided. While studies acknowledge that ‘place’ is important for migrant and refugee settlement and integration (see Platts-Fowler and Robinson, 2015), they have rarely been concerned with the ways in which dispersal to small towns and a small town’s specific structural conditions and settings can shape and affect migrants’ experiences, livelihood and migratory aims (Van Liempt and Miellet, 2020). Most importantly, they rarely engage with what dispersal does to (and means for) small towns, their position(s) within urban and migration systems, and their perceptions. This adds to the general lack of systematic research, scientific interest and knowledge in relation to urban life and migration in small towns and ‘small urbanity’ in urban discourses (Bell and Jayne, 2009; Atkinson, 2019). Lastly, scholarship to date has largely failed to contextualize and compare dispersal regimes—which are today predominantly studied in relation to refugees—within a much longer genealogy of strategies adopted for ‘governing unruly mobility’ of different migrant groups and racialized and undesirable populations (Tazzioli, 2020a), as well as with regard to the designation of dispersal locations.

To address some of these problems, I compare the national dispersal of two different migration forms and groups in a peripherally located, declining and economically struggling small East German town. Specifically, I look at the dispersal of repatriates<sup>1</sup> in the 1990s and 2000s and that of refugees since 2014. Analyzing similarities and differences in the ways in which dispersal has been applied to Germany’s two major migrant groups at different times, and how it has unfolded locally, I explain the development of local policy approaches and civil society structures, as well as the movements and perceptions of both groups in this small town. This analysis reveals the tradition of dispersing and locating migrants across Germany, along with dispersal’s effects on, and consequences for, small towns. In my case study, the migration processes of—and policy reactions to—repatriates and refugees follow a certain pattern and path

1 Repatriates of German descent are people from the countries of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact who, due to their German ethnicity, faced persecution and serious discrimination during the second world war and the subsequent decades. For this reason, from 1953 they were allowed to settle in Germany, along with non-German family members, under a special program called the Federal Expellees Act. Up to 1992, it was assumed that all ethnic Germans living in the aforementioned areas had personally suffered discrimination due to their ethnicity; however, the terminology around this group is contested. While repatriates who have migrated to Germany since 1993 are legally referred to as ‘late repatriates’, the terms used include ‘German displaced persons’, ‘Russian Germans’, ‘German Russians’, ‘Germans from Russia’ and ‘German resettlers’. My respondents referred to themselves as either repatriates or Russian Germans, the latter to highlight their dual identity and affinity with being German while socialized in and sharing cultural knowledge, language and values with countries of the former Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact.

dependency. The distribution, reception and the town's placement policies applied to repatriates are not just reproduced and adapted to the recent refugee inflows. They also repeatedly result in cycles of localized distribution and subsequent small-scale segregation in one and the same neighborhood of the town; integration activities that are only temporary; the alienation of both groups from the town; and, finally, in migrants' leaving and relocating to other (mostly larger) places. Despite substantial numbers of past and recent migrant arrivals, local residents and actors consequently perceive the town as a mere stopover, and view immigration as a periodic strain on top of the town's already precarious socio-economic fabric.

I argue that we cannot grasp these local developments, the (re)production of local policies and migrants' settlement behavior without paying attention to the origins and the ambiguous logics of dispersal as a neoliberal and racial migration-control technology. I propose a *studying through dispersal* approach to make sense of local migration and segregation processes, specific local policy framings, and trends and path dependencies in small towns, as well as to situate small towns within broader migration governance and urban structures. This approach reveals that small towns are productive and relevant sites for migration governance, and for channeling and sorting different forms of migration outside of urban centers. In this light, migrant dispersal, residential distribution and reception often turn small towns—especially peripheralized ones (Bürk, 2013; Kühn, 2015), such as in my case study—into places of containment, waiting zones and transit sites. They become necessary nodes within a larger system of migration governance and mobility control for migrants, taking over the role of permanent 'dumping grounds' (Cheshire and Zappia, 2016) for temporary, transient and dispersed populations, who do not aim to settle but must traverse, and who thus ultimately transit through. This not only prolongs migrants' experiences of displacement and the search for a home, but it also negatively impacts on the image of the small town, casting it as an undesirable place to live, 'where not even migrants want to stay and permanently reside', as a mayor in my case study put it. Contributing to migration and urban literature on migration governance, dispersal and small-town development, this article therefore helps elucidate the intersections between migration governance, left-out towns and new geographies of peripheralization, exclusion and deprivation, while expounding the ways these towns as transit spaces and 'dumping grounds' have become essential to migration governance.

The article is structured as follows. The next section theoretically and contextually clarifies the functions of current dispersal programs as a racial technology for governing mobility and migration, as well as dispersal's relationship to small towns and to the production of transit. This section also explains the relevant factors in studying migration to small towns through dispersal. In the third section, the focus is on the dispersal of repatriates and refugees in Germany, and to small towns, introducing my case study and methods. This sets the stage for my empirical analysis in the fourth section, in which I present the findings regarding local policymaking; civil society engagement; and the concentration, perceptions and movements of repatriates and refugees in this small town. The concluding section discusses the role of small towns in dispersal regimes, introducing ideas for repositioning such towns within urban and migration studies.

### **Studying migration to small towns through dispersal**

Studying migration to small towns through dispersal means, first, analyzing the rationales, politics and structures of dispersal; second, investigating the specific ways small-town actors experience and deal with migrant dispersal and reception; and third, examining the experiences and consequences of the forced movements and forms of containment dispersal creates for migrant populations and small towns. In this section, I set the ground for my analysis and explain the origins of modern dispersal politics.

I explore the logic and characteristics of dispersal, and I analyze what I argue is one of the core rationales and consequences of dispersal: the production of transit spaces and waiting zones, and their relationship to small towns. I apply and expand on these considerations in the subsequent sections.

– Dispersal as a neoliberal and racial technology for governing migration

It is no coincidence that current dispersal systems, or debates about introducing them, emerged in several European countries around the same time, in the 1980s and 1990s. By and large, three developments laid the groundwork for today's dispersal programs, helping us to understand and situate their rationales and politics. First, the 1973 oil crisis and subsequent economic turmoil led to economic restructuring, rising unemployment and 'surplus' labor, particularly affecting the 'guest workers' who had been recruited during the 1950s and 1960s. While initially considered an asset to postwar growth, these workers were subsequently blamed for saturating job markets in Western European countries. The second development was the neoliberal reorganization of public policy and state responsibility: upwards (for example, European Union harmonization processes) and downwards to lower levels of governance, as well as outwards through 'a more market-based management approach' and austerity measures (Schmidtke, 2014: 93). The third development was the stigmatization of migration and the racialization of population groups, including nationalist and othering discourses and practices (Robinson *et al.*, 2003), in relation to the presence of migrant cohorts and their 'failed integration', and regarding increasing numbers of arrivals from *outside of* (Western) Europe since the late 1970s. These migrants have been perceived as a social and economic burden and a threat to political and cultural security (Bloch and Schuster, 2005). As a result of these developments, many European countries applied a two-pronged strategy that paved the way for the introduction of dispersal programs. On the one hand, they tightened immigration and asylum laws regarding entry and admission for non-European migrants after the 1980s (including restrictions on labor recruitment and family reunifications, as well as bans on entry from non-European Community countries). The aim was to deter unwanted migrants and to keep them away from Europe, contained in global South countries (Zetter, 2007). On the other hand, governments started to stigmatize and target the movement, settlement patterns and concentrations of both existing and arriving migrant populations. In this context, dispersal emerged as part of *preventive politics*: to block migrants' free movement, prevent voluntary settlement and 'uncontrolled' concentration in urban areas, and deter the entry of more arrivals.

State dispersal regimes largely function through the logic of 'governing migrant mobility through mobility' (Tazzioli, 2020a). As Tazzioli (2020a) argues, this means that through dispersal, mobility becomes not just an object of control, but also a technology of border and migration governmentality that extends bordering practices, keeps migrants hypermobile, disrupts their autonomous mobility and places them in alternative legal-spatial regimes (see also Kreichauf, 2021). Thus, dispersal is a legal-spatial technology of governing mobility and migration that is implemented in, and normalized through, immigration and asylum laws and policies. In addition, it is embedded in the interlocking mechanisms and procedures of migrant reception and settlement. That is, dispersal is part of a set of procedures—including distribution to regions and municipalities, camp accommodation, residency requirements, and detention and deportation—that govern mobility, movement and rights. All over Western European countries, dispersal has been introduced as an orderly interference to migrants who have arrived in large numbers, and who are framed as posing a challenge or threat to society because of fears over migrant concentrations, uncontrolled settlement, and the emergence of migrants' 'parallel societies' and 'ghettos' in big cities. Dispersal is by nature a racializing governing technique aiming to control, discipline and regulate 'unruly' movements and

concentrations of non-Western European migrants and refugees, whose concentration in what are often characterized as problematic and deprived migrant neighborhoods is deemed to entrench and establish distinct cultural, ethnic and religious practices and values. In turn, these outcomes are suggested not only to hinder integration but also to create ‘ungovernable’ and ‘uncontrollable’ sites of struggle.

These racialization processes are related to, and fueled by, economic rationales and neoliberal social policies. Because state restructuring processes have increasingly handed over responsibilities for social care, welfare support, board and lodging, and the control of migrants to local authorities, these authorities—due to widespread cuts in public sector service provision—perceive the socio-spatial concentration of migrants as economically costly and a strain on municipal provision and budgets. Moreover, dispersed migrants have been deemed an economically unproductive and needy surplus population, and as undeserving ‘welfare scroungers’ who are a burden to social welfare systems (Ambrosini, 2020)—racist stigmas that are ‘constructed by policies and laws, encouraged by media practices and everyday street-level implementation’ (Borrelli and Bochsler, 2021: 363). Dispersal, then, works within the logic of ‘fair burden sharing’ (often as part of normative frameworks of a ‘responsibility for solidarity’ from the lesser ‘burdened’ to the more affected) regarding provision related to reception and accommodation. As a neoliberal social policy, it is embedded in (though increasingly placed in inferior parallel welfare structures) the restrictive, disciplinary and punitive regimes of the neoliberal welfare state (Darling, 2016). Migrants become entitled to (significantly substandard) welfare services in the region or municipality to which they have been allocated; their non-compliance can result in welfare cuts and even arrest.

– Dispersal, small towns and the production of transit spaces

Small towns and rural areas play a decisive role within dispersal programs. Dispersal evolves from the idea that deconcentration and immersion in majority communities will facilitate integration, and that rural areas and smaller towns can offer better services and amenities and less likelihood of the assumed ‘dangers’ associated with concentration in large cities (Larsen, 2011; Weidinger, 2021). Governments also direct migrants to smaller and/or declining towns because of lower costs for care and accommodation and on the grounds of regional development. Using dispersed populations as ‘living catalysts to open up or revitalize communities’ (Simich *et al.*, 2002: 605), dispersal to smaller towns and rural areas is as an attempt to repopulate, stabilize and/or reinvigorate areas in decline. It is hoped that migrants’ presence in these towns will benefit overall demographic development and help secure the economic future—for example, in terms of maintaining and/or expanding infrastructures of general interest or regenerating local labor and housing markets (Gardesse and Lelévrier, 2020; Gauci, 2020; Weidinger, 2021). ‘Underpinned by the assumptions [in political and public discourses] that refugees remain in dispersal locations and that they will benefit from “integration” opportunities offered there’ (De Hoon *et al.*, 2020: 1), smaller towns and rural areas have therefore become the preferred sites for migrant resettlement and ‘integration’ in many European countries (Woods, 2018; Shaffer and Stewart, 2021). However, in contrast to the ‘assumed policy goals of creating a permanent home’ (Shaffer and Stewart, 2021: 341), internal (as well as international) outmigration and onward migration processes are a direct outcome of dispersal, affecting most dispersed migrants and primarily smaller towns and rural areas. Therefore, immigration (and dispersal) does not solve structural and demographic problems. Rather, ‘many small towns continue to face the long-term consequences of ageing, continued selective out-migration, and declining birth rates’ (Wolff *et al.*, 2021: 212). This is because these areas often lack appropriate services, economic and educational opportunities, networks, well-established co-ethnic communities and adequate public transport, and are sites where migrants experience racism and harassment (e.g. Robinson *et al.*, 2003; De Hoon *et al.*, 2020).

Moreover, the dominant logic and purpose of dispersal is not to integrate migrants and provide permanent settlement, but to spread them across a territory and to merely ‘accommodate’ and control them—at least for (although often even beyond) the period during which they have unsecured residence permits (Darling, 2017). Dispersal functions through paradoxical interplays of both forms and periods of (forced) mobility and mobilization, as well as (forced) immobility, immobilization and spatial fixation: the (forced) movement to (and between), and the containment at, assigned locations and ‘convoluted geographies’ (Tazzioli, 2020b), until residential and movement restrictions are lifted and migrants (are allowed to) continue to move. Therefore, dispersal is part of migration management that, as Gill (2009) explains, ‘is characterised by a complex combination of enforced stillness and enforced mobility’. In a controlled manner, dispersal promotes migrants’ channeled circulation along reception chains, while preventing them from actively determining their own movement and destination, thus tying them to specific localities (Tazzioli, 2020a). Consequently, dispersal, reception and accommodation procedures are a vital part of migration governance, and they are ‘increasingly a logistical matter of moving and warehousing’ migrants (Vianelli, 2021: 5). This ‘logistication’ of migration governance, the ‘fracturing of journeys’ (Ansems de Vries and Guild, 2018), and the coexistence and tense interplay between (forced) mobility/mobilization and (forced) immobility/immobilization and confinement (Gill, 2009; Tazzioli, 2020b) produce phases and sites of transit, transfer and stopover that have become central nodes for the workings of migration regimes and for the expansion of internalized borderlands. In these processes, some small towns and rural areas have evolved into jumping-off points for second movements, into transit spaces or ‘transit cities’ (Ikizoglu Erensu and Kaşlı, 2016) where migrants are forced to temporarily reside but then move on. They serve as places of ‘forced gathering’ (Tazzioli, 2020b) and containers ‘for individuals whose lives are placed on hold by the classification processes of sovereign attempts to “manage migration”’ (Darling, 2017: 183). In this light, dispersal functions to keep undesired migrants temporarily contained in undesirable, remote and less attractive places and at a distance from urban areas, communities and networks while they remain subject to greater government control and mobility restrictions. The feature of small towns as sites of transit is distinct from what is discussed in state-centric debates about ‘transit countries’ (e.g. Düvell *et al.*, 2012) and also from the informal and formal sites that emerged as a result of migrants’ movement and transit (around railway stations, parks, informal camps, and reception or detention centers) (see Ansems de Vries and Guild, 2018). Due to their position within the governmental system of dispersal and the way dispersal temporarily restricts migrants’ movements to and within a specific locality, small towns themselves become sites of transit or ‘logistic hubs’ (in reference to Vianelli, 2021) in the fragmented journeys of migrants.

Therefore, studying migration to small towns through dispersal facilitates understanding the relationship between dispersal, transit and small towns. This includes, first, migrants’ mobility and the way spatial production emerges out of, and is sustained or transformed by, the governing of migrant mobility through dispersal and through the associated practices and multiple transit experiences of people who ‘pass through’ (Ikizoglu Erensu and Kaşlı, 2016; Ansems de Vries and Guild, 2018; Tazzioli, 2020a). Second, this approach reveals the particular local negotiations in small towns, and the ways dispersal localities respond to and deal with the ‘locally specific challenges in regulating migration’ (Schmidtke, 2014: 93). Third, studying migration through dispersal allows us to grasp the rescaled position of small towns in larger national, as well as transnational, regimes of migration (governance), in which the dispersal of migrants to these sites contributes to maintaining and further expanding migration and border management. Dispersal and distribution migration connect small towns from the periphery to the center of migration regimes, rescaling them as ‘transit cities’, down from the transit country and up from specific places of transit. Within their rescaled position,

small towns become not only an administrative but also a political and social entity in which transit is governed, negotiated and practiced. We may then see those small towns affected by both dispersal and subsequent outmigration through two intertwined perspectives. First, they can take on the role of ‘logistic centers’ (Vianelli, 2021) for the overall macro-scale distribution and forced ‘spatial scattering’ (Tazzioli, 2020b) of migrants. Second, they function as spaces of ‘forced gathering’ (*ibid.*) and permanent ‘dumping grounds’ (Cheshire and Zappia, 2016) for temporarily residing migrants, where dispersed populations are left until they are allowed to continue to migrate and where they experience being dispossessed of their time, freedom of movement, home and social rights. As places of passage and temporary residence, these spaces can also be sites of collecting forces, practicing transit and preparing for new beginnings, enabling migrants ‘to “move on” from conditions of exile and confinement’ (Oginni, 2021: 463). Applying my case study of a peripheral, declining small town in East Germany, I will further explain in the following section the dual role of small towns as both dumping grounds for dispersed migrants and jumping-off sites and enablers of further migration trajectories.

### **Repatriate and refugee dispersal to a small German town: case study and methods**

In Germany, comprehensive plans for compulsory dispersal programs emerged with the increased immigration of hundreds of thousands of repatriates and refugees, along with the subsequent tightening of immigration laws since the 1980s.<sup>2</sup> After German reunification, debates about repatriates ‘pretending to be Germans’ and about refugees as ‘frauds’ furthered a paradigm shift in how the German government dealt with displaced populations. This ultimately led to a set of new and revised laws, as part of what is known as the Asylum Compromise of 1992/93, which limited the right to, respectively, asylum and repatriation that prior to then had been constitutionally guaranteed. In addition to worsening legal and social conditions and rights, the laws targeted the movement of arrivals through several legal-spatial regulations (which were revised again for refugees after 2014 in the context of the so-called refugee crisis): for both groups, they introduced and/or further extended compulsory dispersal, housing in mass accommodation centers, and residential restrictions. On arrival, the groups are first distributed according to a federal quota system to the German states (*Länder*)—that is, their reception centers. From there, they are allocated to accommodation centers located in the counties or municipalities of a state, based on regional quotas. They usually remain there for between six and 18 months depending on the *Länder* regulations. For refugees undertaking asylum application procedures, a residence requirement entails that they cannot leave the region to which they have been assigned for the duration of the application process. An obligatory three-year residency at the assigned location has been in place between 1989 and 2009 for repatriates and since 2016 for refugees, forcing them to reside within their allocated county/municipality within that period even after they have been granted legal status. Consequently, these geographic restrictions have limited repatriates’ and refugees’ everyday mobility upon arrival as well as their onward mobility to a specific spatial scale (the district they have been assigned to within a German state). In terms of dispersal patterns, repatriates have mostly been distributed to towns with a population of fewer than 50,000 inhabitants

2 Refugees and repatriates share forms of persecution and discrimination as the starting point for migration. However, unlike refugees (who also differ from repatriates in terms of socio-economic, cultural and ethnic contexts; origin; migration processes and experiences; etc.), repatriates are given a certificate proving their status, through which they are automatically granted German citizenship. Around 4.5 million repatriates have arrived in Germany since 1950 (many of them—around 2 million—in the 1990s), and 6.1 million people have applied for asylum in Germany since 1953. The number of repatriate arrivals reached its peak in 1990 (at 397,073 people), while only 7,052 were recorded in 2021 (Bundesverwaltungsamt, 2022). Because of legal changes, this form of immigration has been decreasing steadily since the end of the 1990s and is likely to end soon (Worbs *et al.*, 2013).



rather than to urban agglomerations (Worbs *et al.*, 2013). For refugees, statistical data reveal that significantly larger proportions have been distributed to regions that are less densely populated, and that local proportions of refugees in small towns are often double those in larger cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2018). Fifty-eight percent of refugees with open protection status and pending applications and 42% of refugees with a recognized protection status reside in rural areas (in some German states, it is even more than 80%) (Weidinger, 2021). Therefore, for many repatriates and refugees, initial arrival and settlement in Germany has been not a big-city but a small-town experience. This is also true for the repatriates and refugees dispersed to the town I investigate in this article.

The town chosen for my case study has a total of around 10,800 inhabitants and is located in a non-metropolitan and largely rural region in the East German state of Saxony-Anhalt, about 120 km west of Berlin. I selected this town for several reasons. Compared to many others in West Germany, this small town has experienced only minor migrant movements prior to German reunification (in particular, German expellees from former German eastern provinces after the second world war and so-called migrant contract workers from Vietnam, Mozambique and Cuba between the 1960s and 1980s). Since German reunification, the town has been heavily affected by economic and demographic decline as well as outmigration. It has lost 23% of its residents, mostly due to low birth rates and the exodus of younger cohorts to more prosperous regions. The town has relatively high unemployment rates, and it still faces challenges related to the transition from 'socialist' to capitalist market structures. Applying Atkinson's (2019: 8) typology for small towns, my case study site is a 'small town in remote/rural or peripheral regions' characterized by its peripheral location, poor connectivity, an aging demographic structure, the lack of large firms that could stabilize the local labor market, an unattractiveness to outside investors, and 'the failure of local government to develop a coherent and strategic local development policy'. These circumstances and transformation processes have coincided with the dispersal and arrival of repatriates and refugees and the town being mandated to provide reception and accommodation services to them. Relative to the size of the town's local population, both groups arrived in comparatively large numbers through dispersal. Around 2,500 repatriates arrived throughout the 1990s and early 2000s and approximately 1,500 refugees have arrived since 2014; the majority of the latter are from Syria (50%), Afghanistan (19.4%) and Iraq (3.9%). The combination of the town's limited migration traditions and experiences, its peripheral location, post-reunification restructuring processes, and the sporadic arrival of migrant groups in large numbers since the 1990s makes this small town an appropriate case for studying migration governance, dispersal, migrant movement and local perceptions. At the same time, the case reflects general trends regarding dispersal mechanisms as well as migration to and policymaking in smaller towns, especially peripheralized and declining ones.

My research engagement with this town began in 2010, in the context of an interest in segregation processes in small East German towns. At that time, repatriates constituted the largest migrant population (around 80%). I subsequently continued my research, and in particular with the arrival of refugees since 2014, I examined the trajectory of the town and its newcomers, following the reception of and local responses to both repatriates and refugees over a period of almost 10 years. My research included three extended fieldwork periods (2010/11, 2014/15 and 2018/19) during which I applied the following methods. First, I analyzed the small town's policies and municipal documents on migration and integration. Second, I conducted spatial analyses and observations in the town's immigrant neighborhood, including Kusenbach's (2003) 'go-along' method—a hybrid of participant observation and interviewing—through which I accompanied seven individual informants navigating the small town and inquired about their daily experiences and perceptions. Third, I carried out four focus group

discussions: two with key office holders, civil society actors and migrant organizations in 2011 and 2018; one with repatriates in 2011; and one with refugees in 2019. Fourth, I conducted semi-structured interviews, each lasting one to three hours. Overall, my study comprises a sample of 39 interview partners (n=39): 32 were queried in semi-structured interviews and seven in go-alongs.<sup>3</sup> My respondents can be roughly divided into four groups: (1) political and administrative authorities of the small town, including three mayors, representatives from the local police, the municipal archive, the registry office and administrative staff from the town's culture department (n=12); (2) civil society actors such as the head of the local library and representatives from social counseling agencies and local clubs (n=7); (3) representatives from organizations and initiatives that have become active in the field of local migrant care and integration, including AWO (workers' welfare association) and the local Integrationstreff (integration meet-up) (n=4); and (4) repatriates and refugees (n=16).

Because mobility behavior and local state dealings with immigration often unfold slowly, this long-term approach and the engagement with different groups, actors and informants helped me to understand how and why local changes emerge, and to what extent various factors influence local transformations, integration policies, and migrant movements and perceptions. However, two significant shortcomings of this study should be noted. First, while my comparison of the dispersal and settlement of repatriates and refugees in this small town provides several relevant findings, as elaborated in the following sections, it is limited by the fact that my fieldwork investigates two different migration periods. When I started this research in 2010, most of the then still dominant migrant group of repatriates had left the town. Therefore, I could only explore repatriates' arrival experiences and the small town's initial dealings with repatriates in the 1990s until the early 2000s through archival and document research and the memories of my respondents, whereas for refugees I was able to gather data firsthand. The second shortcoming concerns the composition of my sample. For refugees, I managed to create a balance between different age and sex groups. For repatriates, however, most of my respondents were female and older than 40. This is because younger cohorts of repatriates left this small town during the past two decades and because female repatriates were more visible in public spaces, active in local organizations and fluent in German. Moreover, I did not include minors in my research.

### **Transiting through a small town: policymaking, civil society initiatives and migrant movements**

The migration history of repatriates and refugees in 'my' small town is not just a story of dispersal and large numbers of arrivals over a relatively short period of time. It is also one of temporary containment, residential concentration and massive outmigration. In 2019, only 220 repatriates were still residing in the town, and by then approximately half of the refugees had already left since the heyday of arrivals in 2015/16. In the following sections, I analyze how dispersal as a governmental process unfolds locally and how it is experienced by different actors (including dispersed migrants) in this town. My analysis shows that there are significant similarities between the arrival of repatriates and refugees with regard to policymaking, settlement patterns and integration activities. This is because the town restarted and extended many structures and practices established during the arrival of repatriates in the 1990s and 2000s for the more recent reception of refugees. I further explain that transit—the interplay of dispersal, arrival and outmigration—is what characterizes immigration in this town, which impacts on and frames the authorities' and civil society actors' dealings with immigrants, as well as migrants' perceptions and experiences.

3 The interviews were conducted in German. I translated all the quotes in this article into English.

– Making policies in a transit town

Policymaking and integration activities in this small town are stipulated by its location within multi-level governance structures (and the competences and responsibilities that result from it), the town's socio-economic and peripheralized position, and local particularities, such as the engagement of the mayor and civil society practices. The initial reception and onward distribution of dispersed migrants are organized at the county level. The municipality then arranges local reception and accommodation, first in accommodation centers and then in the local housing market. Between 1990 and 2019, the small town had three different mayors (each of whom I interviewed) who shaped this process as well as the development of respective policies and practices. Three different phases characterize the development of policies: resentment, integration as the bundling of civil society work, and integration as diversity marketing.

In the early 1990s, when most of the repatriates arrived, the county and town were concerned with managing their accommodation. Initially, long-term approaches and the opportunities, needs, challenges and problems of the repatriates were not in the foreground of their political agenda. There are several reasons for this. In the wake of German reunification, the county and town were undergoing major public policy and administrative restructuring processes, changes in competences, and the reorganization of their administrative territories in the early 1990s. In this period, the obligatory reception and care for repatriates was experienced as an additional 'burden' and was met with resentment, insecurities and sometimes hostility. Local authorities never considered (or wanted to consider) repatriates as long-term residents. This situation was aggravated by the fact that the vast majority of arriving repatriates had no intention of settling in the town, and throughout the 1990s there were large fluctuations between newly arriving repatriates and those leaving as soon as their residential obligation expired.

As a result, it was only after the number of repatriates heavily declined and then consolidated at a low level in the middle of the 2000s that the county and town began to work together to develop several initiatives. In 2008, the authorities created the position of an integration coordinator to serve for two years and established the Platform for Integration to organize, bundle and discuss civil society integration approaches. In 2009, they also agreed on the town's first integration concept, addressing issues such as housing, language education, labor market integration and civil society engagement. The bundling of civil society work as a means to govern arrival and integration was reinvented and advanced when refugees began arriving in large numbers from 2014 onward. Largely benefiting from the earlier reception-management experiences and the structures developed during the previous few years, the county was quick to introduce the Integration Network (based on the Platform for Integration). Through this web of social welfare organizations, volunteers, and representatives of churches and municipalities, accommodation and services for arriving refugees were coordinated. In 2016, the county reintroduced the post of integration coordinator, tasked with managing integration projects and advising project developers regarding funding. In 2017, the country revised the integration concept, now almost exclusively directed towards refugees. This included some generally defined guidelines and intentions, mostly in the field of accommodation and housing, and in direct reference to the experiences the county and town had with repatriates.

Since 2018, the then newly elected third mayor has put migration and integration at the top of this small town's agenda. He has introduced a shift in policymaking, in which migration is seen not as a burden but as a benefit to the town's development. Even though far fewer refugees have been arriving and the number of migrants moving away has grown, the mayor (2018) wants to develop an immigrant-friendly town 'because diversity is a competitive advantage'. His goal is to turn migration into an asset for

developing the town—an approach frequently applied in peripheralized, declining cities as part of regrowth and revitalization agendas and an attempt to reinvigorate areas in decline (see Pottie-Sherman, 2018). Thus current initiatives include the launch of multilingual websites and event calendars, as well as the inclusion of migrant- and diversity-related themes in the town's events, such as food festivals and 'diversity weeks'. Part of this effort to promote a welcoming and inclusive image is the deliberate avoidance of confronting the (history of) racist attacks and widespread xenophobia in the town, where 26% of voters turned to the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland* in the 2021 election. Instead, the municipality put in place civil dialogues to update locals about the arrival of refugees and a hotline where they can report their concerns regarding migrants' reception. The purpose of such initiatives is 'not [to] create the impression that immigrants and their needs are prioritized', as a representative of a local migrant organization (2018) explained. At present, strategies that promote the advantages of immigration and foster a sense of inclusion among local non-migrant residents, geared towards pacifying local residents, are preponderant. By contrast, strategies that support migrants, local immigration organizations, or inclusion of the diverse political and cultural interests of migrant residents are lacking or are used for marketing.

– Providing migration assistance: civil society's integration work

Civil society actors provide the foundations for the town's integration work. They become involved wherever there is a lack of or a delay in local policy implementation and state support, and they also push for policy development. They have transformed, reduced and reinvented their activities multiple times throughout the dispersal and migration history of repatriates and refugees.

To 'get the work done', as a representative of a local refugee support group (2018) describes it, civil society's work relies on a close network of actors (many of whom have been engaged for years), its ability to draw from previous experience, and its flexibility to adapt relatively quickly to changing circumstances and needs. For example, for more than 20 years the director of the local library has been organizing integration activities, such as creating spaces for language and cultural learning and exchanges between newcomers and locals. While it was initially concerned with providing activities, Russian literature, German classes and intercultural learning for repatriates, the library changed its services for arriving refugees after 2014. Similarly, the town's *Integrationstreff* has become the main institution for migrant counselling, leisure activities and community work. Developed in 2007 as a meeting place for repatriates, it found allies in a local volunteer initiative for the support of refugees, which subsequently moved to the *Integrationstreff* in 2014 and transformed it into the focal point for refugees and the remaining repatriates. The director of the *Integrationstreff* (2018) highlighted that 'the biggest advantage of this work in a small town is that everyone knows everybody'. As soon as people become actively involved in working with refugees and repatriates, they quickly learn who to contact if particular problems or questions arise, and how to respond pragmatically to challenges. For example, when a refugee accommodation center opened in 2015, the manager informed refugees about the local football club. The director of the club (2018) recalled that one day a group of about 40 refugees unexpectedly showed up, all wanting to play on the field. When the director arrived and saw the crowd, he accordingly took some footballs and then, 'Well, then we just started playing football'.

The biggest challenge for civil society actors as 'structural transversal enablers' (Radford, 2016), who actively support integration and intercultural dynamics and occupy a bridging role in the small-town community, has been the fluctuation in the numbers of repatriates and refugees and their changing needs over time. In particular, when some migrants have become (temporarily) included in local structures (such as the library or the football team), civil society actors have struggled with the fact that many of the

people they work with have left or want to leave the town. The directors of the library and the Integrationstreff (2018) remember that volunteers and people who became newly engaged in community work wanted repatriates and refugees to learn German and to make a home in this small town; however, after a time, they realized that people from both groups have individual plans for their life and that they often do not want to stay there, so ‘we had to say and to realize, okay, you have plans, and we will try to do anything for you so that you are able to achieve those plans’. Compared with repatriates, for whom many initiatives and projects petered out because locals were unable to respond adequately to the repatriates’ desire not to be integrated into *this* town, civil society work for refugees transformed from ‘integration’ into ‘assisting individual needs’. This implied—at least for the library, the Integrationstreff and some migrant organizations and initiatives—a change in the approach to ‘integration’: they increasingly placed individual aims at the center of their consultations and interactions, equipping refugees with the necessary knowledge and guidance to deal with the particular challenges they face. For example, the Integrationstreff diversified and professionalized its resources towards supporting refugees in local labor-market and community integration, as well as visits to (and communications with) public authorities. They also offer help in breaking down residential restrictions, identifying opportunities for family reunification, finding a job, and locating housing in another place once residential restrictions in this town expire. In other words, civil society actors have started to acknowledge the reality of refugees moving on while only a small number remain.

- From the Red Square to Little Damascus: local segregation and dispersal as containment

Dispersal policies are linked to and are ‘enacted in simultaneity with measures of spatial concentration and segregation’ (Tazzioli, 2020b: 513). While federal dispersal programs aim to prevent ‘problematic concentrations’ of migrants and racialized groups, in fact they contribute to and shape the development of politically induced and administratively regulated small-scale segregation processes at the local level (Phillimore and Goodson, 2006; Kreichauf, 2015). In my case study, repatriates and refugees were initially accommodated in one of the town’s four accommodation shelters. They were then distributed to apartments in one and the same neighborhood, the town’s largest public housing area separated from the rest of the town by a high-speed rail line. This neighborhood consists of prefabricated and poorly maintained social housing blocks built between 1979 and 1990. Since German reunification, it has experienced significant population loss (60%), high vacancy rates and the demolition of 40% of the buildings. According to data from the local public housing companies, the neighborhood is home to around 1,300 inhabitants, over 10% of the town’s population. Most residents are either elderly and/or socio-economically weak and dependent on social welfare. In the small town, this area is generally stigmatized as a disadvantaged and socially troubled neighborhood where poverty, violence, disorder and unemployment are concentrated—a neighborhood that people with the means to do so avoid. As Cheshire and Zappia (2016: 2085) explain, the designation of such areas for containing specific population groups ‘is not an accidental process, but is based on the classification and selection of city areas or neighborhoods as suitable spaces for the containment of unwanted social groups’.

The concentration of repatriates and refugees in this neighborhood is a direct outcome of the conditions that result from federal dispersal programs and the town’s local distribution practices and housing policies. Under the obligation to accommodate both groups, administrators and the municipally owned housing companies pursued a strategy of concentrating repatriates and refugees in this disadvantaged neighborhood for several reasons. First, migrants’ spatial containment in this area allows for greater control by the authorities. The neighborhood is a spatial extension of the town’s migrant

shelters and an extension of power over migrant mobility. Second, the aim was to keep contact between migrants and local residents to a minimum, and to avoid conflict between locals and newcomers in ‘stable German neighborhoods’ because, as the first mayor (2010) argued, distribution to such neighborhoods would have caused ‘protests und unrest by locals’. Therefore, he stated that it was better for migrants ‘to live amongst their own’ and to not ‘blight German neighborhoods’. Third, this neighborhood was already characterized as problematic and in economic and social decline, and repatriates and refugees have been perceived as foreign, different, unwanted, poor, dependent on state support and without any discernible function for the town. Authorities thought that both groups would not make the place any worse; in fact, they were deemed suitable to be housed in this area of what Wacquant (2008) calls ‘urban outcasts’. Fourth, for economic reasons, the decision was made to provide housing for repatriates and refugees ‘where there was space’, as representatives of the local housing company (2010 and 2018) put it. This approach was used to refinance the struggling housing companies, which had recorded high levels of vacancies in the neighborhood. Under the orchestration of town and housing officials, apartments were provided exclusively in this area, a strategy aimed at allocating ‘less desirable properties in less desirable areas to less desirable tenants’, as Cheshire and Zappia (2016: 2083) explain. In addition, both groups faced discrimination when they tried to find housing elsewhere. A repatriate (2011) remembers that a housing company told her that only Germans would live in the buildings she was visiting and thus there would be no opportunity for her to rent a place. A refugee (2018) explained that private landlords also ‘do not rent to foreigners’, and that ‘as a refugee, you do not have the chance to rent an apartment outside of this neighborhood’. Besides these practices, the socio-economic situation of both groups—at least in the phase of arrival—also determines local segregation and restricts local mobility. New arrivals usually depend on social welfare or have little income, and thus they are often limited to social and low-rent housing because the immigration office will not cover the (often higher) rents in other areas. Consequently, repatriates and refugees had to accept tenancy there, rendering this neighborhood as both last resort and first ‘choice’ for those with no alternative.

The segregation of migrants contributed to powerful stigmatization by the small-townners that cemented migrants’ sense of alienation and marginalization. With the arrival of repatriates in the 1990s, locals racialized and labeled this neighborhood ‘the Russian Ghetto’, and up to the early 2010s, the predominant perception was that repatriates would ‘rule the neighborhood’, as the first mayor stated in 2010. This perception was fed by narratives about how locals would have to pay fees when crossing the pedestrian bridge to this neighborhood—a myth so powerful that local residents still bring it up today when talking about the area. The perception that massive numbers of repatriates would reside there (whereas they never made up more than 20% of the neighborhood’s demography) was largely a result of the racist stigma of the stereotyped ‘criminal Russian’, in addition to the pre-existing negative image of a deprived area, as a social consultant (2011) expounded. With the decline of the repatriate population and the inflow of refugees after 2014, the ‘Red Square’ turned into ‘Little Damascus’, but refugees also had to face stigmatization. The small-townners speak of the neighborhood as ‘Little Syria’, tell stories about ‘refugees who would light fires in basements and dumpsters’, and claim it would be a ‘tinderbox for social rifts’, as a local (2018) said. This narrative was reinforced by the relocation of the town’s homeless shelter to the neighborhood in 2018, for which the town rents apartments from housing companies. The resulting concentration has sparked conflicts, fear and competition over resources between homeless Germans and refugees (with Germans claiming refugees are given better apartments and support), as well as between refugees and the remaining repatriates, who argue that refugees are treated better than repatriates when they arrived. These tensions contribute to societal perceptions and the ‘territorial

stigmatization' (Wacquant, 2008) of a troubled and deprived neighborhood; this in turn affects the alienation, downgrading and fission of people living there, adding to their ambition to move away from the neighborhood (and the town).

Nevertheless, both the refugees and the repatriates, while required to reside in this neighborhood, also frame it as a safe space and a space of belonging—even if only temporarily. This becomes apparent from their attributions, which include place-specific connotations (the repatriates call this neighborhood 'Red Square' and the refugees refer to it as 'Little Damascus') that not only differ from the local residents' national-ethnic-based label ('*Russian Ghetto*' and '*Little Syria*'), but also reflect the ways repatriates and refugees negotiate and practice temporary belonging and transit (Herslund, 2021). The vast majority of repatriates in the town were in fact not from Moscow (where Red Square is located) but from either the Russian countryside or former countries of the Soviet Union. Similarly, the majority of Syrian refugees did not come from Damascus but from areas in the northwest of Syria (such as Homs and Aleppo). Their attributions function as references and symbols for belonging, identity and space-making in an overall hostile environment, where they have become stuck in the distributed town and segregated in this marginalized and stigmatized neighborhood.

Dispersal and local concentration practices have turned the neighborhood into what scholars call 'collecting tanks' (Keller, 2005) or 'dumping grounds' (Cheshire and Zappia, 2016). Such public housing estates are the quintessential dumping ground for the poor and the unwanted—less desirable 'sink estates' that collect and further marginalize the excluded (Bloch and Schuster, 2005). Perceiving repatriates and refugees as unwanted and dysfunctional population groups that the town is forced to accommodate because of dispersal policies, the town's authorities have designated and demarcated this area to place, contain and marginalize them; control their mobility and residential moves; distance them socially and spatially from German residents in other areas; and make profit by forcing them to take tenancy in an area that has already proven unpopular among local German residents. Repatriates, refugees and other residents of the neighborhood are aware of their misfortune at being stuck and forced to reside in a place that the small-towners describe as a (Russian or Syrian) ghetto and deprived area. They experience that the stigma of this neighborhood is transferred onto them even beyond its premises (Wacquant, 2008). An interviewed resident (2018) recalls that when she frequents the town's center with her family, wearing hijab and speaking Arab to her children, she sometimes hears other people saying, 'Oh, she must be from the ghetto, from Little Syria behind the train tracks'. This neighborhood exemplifies that the logic of dispersal—the (forced) movement to and the containment at assigned locations—is transferred to the small town, its local placement policies and its spatial organization. It has resulted in migrants being channeled to and contained in the town's disadvantaged and unpopular neighborhood. These processes have transformed the neighborhood into a place of forced arrival and a permanent 'dumping ground' for temporary residents, as well as a transit neighborhood that most repatriates and refugees—temporarily contained—pass through and outmigrate from while practicing transit and preparing further journeys.

– Transit and the consequences for the small town

Involuntary distribution, forced local segregation and experiences of discrimination have been the driving forces behind repatriates and refugees feeling unwelcome and unable or reluctant to make a permanent home in this small town. A repatriate I interviewed in 2011 and in 2018 remembered that in the 1990s, 'Nazis protested and stormed into the neighborhood, especially on Hitler's birthday'. She also reported that even today locals shout at her, 'You are not in Russia, speak German!' when she frequents the town with family or friends. Refugees (2018) stated that they repeatedly encountered hatred and insults in public or when visiting the local

immigration and social services offices. According to them, it was the aim of officials ‘to not be too nice and too welcoming to try to keep us away from visiting their services’. In addition, the town’s peripheralized position, its lack of economic opportunities and its few chances for upward mobility have influenced migrants’ decision to move on. One of the respondents I met in 2011 and stayed in contact with throughout the research process lived in this small town until 2015—in total for 14 years, which is exceptionally long compared with the average four-year stay of repatriates. This respondent said:

The consequence of distribution to this small town is that people did not voluntarily come here. It was clear from the start that they would move away. We all wanted to move to West Germany and the refugees also want to live in West Germany, because we knew and they know now that there is nothing here for them in this small town—no work, no future—and that East Germany sucks. Every repatriate I know from back then moved away to the ‘Golden West’. And now I see on Facebook that they have houses and jobs. They would not have achieved that in this small town.

Some argued that even if they could find work and better housing and experience upward mobility, they would still leave because they see homemaking in this town as too difficult due to its social environment and its great distance from relatives or other migrant community members. As Larsen (2011: 333) shows in her work, ‘not being surrounded by a network of kinsmen nor having the opportunity to form new family-like relations with co-ethnics within one’s local surroundings can therefore seriously affect the ability of refugee families to establish a new life’, and consequently they move away from the distributed locality. Others also experienced dispersal and the distribution to this town as too great a reduction of their own agency and migratory aims. A refugee (2018) who had lived in the town for two years explained:

I cannot wait to leave. Living here is just a waste of my time and it takes a lot of my energy. I don’t know where I will go yet. I have people here and there, but after being stuck here and forced to stay here, all I want is just to leave and to go wherever I really want to.

This strong desire has led some repatriates and refugees to develop strategies to circumvent residential obligations and to already aim, on arrival, to shorten their stay in the town. Some refugees obtain fake labor contracts in another region to be able to move away, or they simply leave despite the potential consequences (such as a fine or criminal penalty of up to €25,000 or a prison sentence of up to one year). Others only pretend to live there: a few of the current refugees are officially registered in the town, but only go there occasionally to pick up mail and attend appointments at local social and immigration offices, while they informally reside in another location, often with friends or community members. For these practices, as well as for ‘formally’ leaving the town after the expiration of residential obligations, both groups have used their forced stay in the small town to practice transit and to plan their outmigration and life after. To do so, they rely on social capital, networks, and family and friendship ties, as well as the sharing of knowledge and information through which they facilitate mobility and find housing and work in yet another new local setting (Montagna *et al.*, 2021).

The outmigration of allocated repatriates and refugees has impacted on the position of the town and its functioning. Officials and civil society actors are aware that most migrants do not live there voluntarily, and that this peripherally located and declining small town has little to tempt them to stay permanently. This is frustrating for the small-town actors because after years of transition processes, a general population decline and outmigration, they have realized that they are increasingly dependent



on immigration to revitalize services and to keep activities running. For example, the local housing companies have managed to achieve a relatively steady vacancy rate of 10% in the past five years, largely because of the arrival of refugees. With the outmigration of this group, they fear increasing vacancies, lack of revenue and the further demolition of residential buildings. Social infrastructures also suffer as a result of outmigration processes. For example, there have been discussions about closing the local library due to the declining visitor base. The local handball team and swimming classes were reopened when refugees arrived and became important places and enablers for intercultural exchanges and intercommunity connection. ‘Without the refugees’, the third mayor (2018) summarized, ‘they may shut down business’. For the town, this means a potential further reduction of services and activities that would affect all residents and the town’s future. The outmigration also negatively affects the small town’s image and the self-perception of the residents. The head of the local library mentioned that the outmigration of yet another group of newcomers ‘really makes you consider why I am here in this town, and maybe if I myself should leave’. A volunteer at the Integrationstreff (2018) said: ‘I see people coming and going, first the repatriates and then the refugees. They go and I stay. You see in the long term the downfall of the structures here, and you wonder why you stay here’.

For local officials, such as the mayors, the fact that dispersal has repeatedly turned their small town into a transit site has created a situation in which they ‘feel used, but also useless’: used by federal and regional governments and useless to migrants and other leaving residents, as the first mayor (2010) put it. The second mayor (2016) compared dispersal and the subsequent outmigration with a forced marriage:

Nobody wants it and nobody is happy with it. We are not happy, our residents are not happy, and the migrants are not happy, but we all have to deal with it anyway. And then your forced partner, who never wanted to be with you in the first place, leaves you, and some day you are forced again into a new marriage.

Dispersal, transit and outmigration chip away at the self-confidence of the small town’s actors and residents. This leaves the impression that ‘not even the Russians and the refugees want to live here and we are not good enough for them’—an impression that strengthens the small-towners’ feeling of being just ‘the backyard for, or a little cog in a big wheel of, making policy and migration governance’, as the third mayor (2018) described the situation. This adds to a general frustration of peripheralized small towns about their exclusion from dominant resources of power, lack of control over political agenda setting, as well as insufficient possibilities and abilities to be involved in decision-making processes that affect their trajectories and futures (Kühn, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

My case study shows that migrant dispersal (along with local distributions and residential obligations) has turned peripheralized small towns into permanent transit sites for temporary migrants and into tools for governing migrant mobility. They have become places where migrants’ movement is disrupted and slowed down, where dispersed migrants are temporarily contained and ‘dumped’, and where they are kept in limbo concerning their rights and residency. This has consequences both for the affected small towns and the dispersed migrants, but also for the way we think about and study small towns in relation to migration and governance. Dispersal does not regard migrants and receiving communities as agents. For small towns, dispersal and the production of transit has the effect that ‘their specific considerations, needs and expectations are not adequately considered’ (Gauci, 2020: 41). This results in resentment and resistance to migration (often including right-wing populism and xenophobia), as well as towards higher authorities and decision makers. Migrants see

the small town only as a temporary transit site they are forced into until they can move on. The involuntary stay in a small town represents another obstacle they must deal with as part of their migration trajectories—migrants regard it as a waste of time, energy and resources that further prolongs and adds to their experiences of displacement and unhoming. Therefore, these small towns have become a vantage point for examining the relationship between mobility, migration management, local governance, and violence in the form of exclusion, discrimination and racist harassment (Ansems de Vries and Guild, 2018).

Regarding research into small towns in relation to migration, my analysis argues for considering dispersal and the production of transit as important factors in making local migration policies. Even though research into small towns and migration has experienced a significant rise in recent years (see Barberis and Pavolini, 2015; Woods, 2018; Herslund, 2021; Weidinger, 2021), dispersal and transit have not yet been conceptualized as determinants for framing local policies, civil society practices and migrants' trajectories. By introducing the approach of studying through dispersal, I explain how dispersal transforms the territoriality of migration management and migrant movements, and how it significantly shapes local governance processes and migrants' perceptions and experiences while also suggesting a new way to analyze these processes. As a research and analytical strategy, studying through dispersal reveals path dependencies regarding local dealings with immigration, and it exemplifies that dispersal not only creates transit but is also reproduced and rescaled to the local level in the form of local distribution and segregation practices. This underscores that the dynamics of dispersal and 'forced scattering' on the one hand, and concentration and 'forced gathering' on the other, are simultaneously played out and unfolded in small-town localities (Tazzioli, 2020b).

Moreover, my approach and research findings enable us to understand and position small towns within the wider migration governance apparatus and the transformation of urban landscapes more broadly, revealing the dual logics of the relation between dispersal and peripheralized small towns. On the one hand, peripheralization processes legitimate dispersal to rural regions and small towns. Dispersal further peripheralizes the small town. It contributes to small towns' socio-spatial decoupling and weakening of political power while making it an internalized border site located at the fringes of society, thereby respatializing the migration frontier within the broader regional and urban landscape itself (Gross-Wyrtzen, 2020). On the other hand, dispersal and distribution migration connect small towns from the periphery to the center of migration regimes, rescaling them as 'transit cities', down from the transit country and up from specific places of transit. Thus small towns are turned into significant players for the workings of current migration regimes. Within this rescaled position, small towns become not only an administrative but also a political and social entity, in which transit is governed, negotiated and practiced. They function as 'logistic centers' or permanent 'dumping grounds' (Cheshire and Zappia, 2016), temporarily warehousing migrants in less desirable public housing estates and dispossessing them of time, freedom of movement and social rights (Tazzioli, 2020a; Vianelli, 2021). At the same time, they also function as enablers, as places of preparation of further migration trajectories (Oginni, 2021).

My theoretical and methodological conclusions have some limitations, especially regarding the conceptualizations of small towns as well as the generalization of the findings. The small town (similar to 'the city' or 'the urban') is a contested, fragmented, blurry and somewhat underexplored setting, and as a concept it raises many problems in terms of its definition. This is because small towns have mostly been defined in relation to (or as the opposite of) big cities, 'as an urban "other" to the global metropolis' (Bell and Jayne, 2009: 684). With regard to migration, small towns have commonly been framed as 'non-metropolitan areas', 'small-scale destinations' that have a subordinate

position within the urban hierarchy, and ‘new migrant destinations’ where migration takes place ‘outside of large gateways’ (Barberis and Pavolini, 2015). Dispersal (along with subsequent transit and outmigration) doubtlessly affects all cities and regions in the countries where it is implemented. However, it is especially in the small and peripheralized towns, with small numbers of existing immigrants, where the arrival and ‘transiting through’ of dispersed migrants (especially when they are large in number in relation to local residents) has a greater impact on the socio-economic fabric and demographic setting compared with larger cities or towns located near urban centers. Dispersal not only adds to locally specific challenges of these areas but also reveals their structural weaknesses, shortcomings of policymaking, and the consequences of neoliberal restructuring, including the interrelated and mutually reinforcing dynamics of peripheralization processes. Therefore, analyzing the governance of migration and dispersal through small towns, and their position within migration regimes, provides new ideas for the way we think about and define such towns, including their entanglement in changing geographies and spaces of globalization and global migration, and rearticulations of socio-economic space.

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