

Article

Migration-Related Conflicts as Drivers of Institutional Change?

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Abstract

This article examines the role of social conflicts in the context of migration and discusses the relation between such conflicts and institutional change. We understand conflicts as tensions that evoke contradiction between different social groups or institutional actors. Varied urban contexts together with dynamic immigration of heterogeneous population groups can induce negotiation processes that affect institutional settings and actors. Conflicts have therefore been an integral part of urban coexistence, and cities have always been places where these conflicts play out. We assume that conflicts are social phenomena, which have multiple causes and effects. Public assumptions about conflicts in connection with migration often have a negative or destructive impetus, while conflict theory ascribes to conflicts potential positive effects on societal change. Conflicts can represent forms of socialization and the possibility of adapting or changing social conditions. This article discusses the extent to which migration-related conflicts induce institutional change. Using qualitative empirical results from the BMBF-funded research project MigraChance, we present a case study that reconstructs the emergence and course of a conflict surrounding the construction of a Syriac-Orthodox church in Bebra (Hesse) in the 1990s. Analyzing this conflict both in depth and in relation to its local context, we show that migration is only one part of what we refer to as migration-related conflicts, and we shed light on the complexity of factors that can result in institutional change. Change can also occur indirectly, in small steps, and with ambivalent normative implications.

Keywords

change; conflicts; Germany; institutional change; migration

Issue

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1. Introduction

In heterogeneous urban contexts and in the course of dynamic immigration of heterogeneous population groups, conflicts have always been part of urban coexistence. Thus, cities have always been places of conflict (Amin, 2002; Valentine, 2008). For that reason, we consider it necessary to understand the dynamics and impacts of conflicts, and their role for social development. In this article, we will focus on social conflicts in the context of migration, which we understand as everyday manifestations of profound societal negotiation processes.

In the German context, the interpretation and implications of conflicts became the subject of debates in

public media, politics and interdisciplinary scientific discourses in recent years. Several authors in the field of German migration research see conflicts in connection with immigration as a sign of successful integration rather than rising problems. This is a relatively new perspective that gained popularity within the last decade. In this interpretation, descendants of migrants challenge the legitimacy of the hegemonies and institutions of the host society and therefore, more conflicts may arise (El-Mafaalani, 2018; Treibel, 2017a). Hence, one central aspect of migration research is the analysis of shifting power relations between long-established residents and immigrants (Treibel, 2017b). On the one hand, the rediscovery of the political dispute points to hopes for a revival of democracy and its

institutions (Mouffe, 2014). On the other hand, it reveals a demand for an adaptation to the long-denied realities of migration. Since cities are ultimately the result of sustained, long-term (im)migration, these effects must—and should—be found locally, and “institutions, from administrations to municipal enterprises, museums, libraries and educational institutions need to change to pay justice to the ever-growing social diversity. This change has become a matter of survival” (Terkessidis, 2010, p. 8, authors’ translation).

In the past, the academic and, particularly, the political debate often ethnicized and culturalized conflicts about migration and adopted a focus on problems (Bommes, 2010). These terms describe the attribution and reduction of conflicts to ethnic or cultural differences between groups of people based on their actual or attributed national, ethnic, cultural or religious background. For us, migration-related refers less to the features assigned to groups or individuals. Our stance on migration rather examines the negotiations related to it and to the associated societal and institutional change. Hence, our approach focuses on conflicts in which a local society discusses the object of conflict in relation to migration, where migration becomes a reason itself. We are thus interested in examining the relationships between migration, conflict and institutional change.

The expectation that guided our research was that, in the course of such migration-related conflicts, institutional change occurs as a process of adaption to new societal realities. This change, we assumed, would manifest in the creation of new institutions, the adaptation of existing institutions, the formation of new networks of actors, or through learning processes in pre-existing structures. Furthermore, in conflicts, actors would negotiate the validity of norms and values and thereby question and reaffirm the legitimacy of existing institutions. Finally, conflicts can also accompany the establishment of institutions and negotiate their role and position in a local society.

Our contribution addresses the question of how the conflict under investigation—the planned construction of a Syriac-Orthodox church in the German small town of Bebra in the mid-1990s—influenced local institutional settings. With this in mind, we review the assumptions within theories of institutional change and its relation to conflict and analyze how the aforementioned conflict became a particularly contentious process. We trace the complexity of this conflict in detail and reveal how different institutions interacted with its dynamics. To conclude, we discuss the interrelationship of conflicts and institutions with an emphasis on the specific ways they are intertwined and highlight less expected moments of change.

2. Conflict, Migration and Institutional Change

Our research interest combines topics rarely associated with one another in the common body of literature

on conflict theory, migration research and theories of institutional change. Much is known about institutional change at the level of nation-states. At the subnational level, there is growing attention to institutional change but the field is largely “underexplored” (Evenhuis, 2017, p. 510) and the same holds true for the municipal level. Recent years have seen increased interest in the role of conflict in institutional change especially by institutional economists (Shami, 2019; Zikos, 2020). However, theories of institutional change have paid little attention to conflict theories, whether on a national (Resch, Kersting, & Müller, 2019) or international level (Mitchell, 2005). Even though conflict research on a local level paid attention to migration, particularly to so-called ethnic conflicts (Hüttermann, 2000), conflict theory engaged less with migration despite its inherent interest in drivers of social change. Migration research, finally, paid attention to the development of migration-related institutions like foreigner’s advisory councils but much less focused on conflicts. In order to examine how these topics are related conceptually, we will review existing theories in the following paragraphs.

Conflict theory attributes certain effects to social conflict. Coser (1957) assumes that “no group can be entirely harmonious” and that therefore “conflict is an essential element in group formation” (Coser, 1957, p. 31). Another assumption is that the negotiation of power is a basic element that “creates [groups’] interests in change as well as interests in the status quo” (Dahrendorf, 1988, p. 28). Thus, social conflicts can have an effect on social structures when goals, values or interests among opponents are negotiated (Coser, 1957, p. 151). Moreover, conflicts would lead to “revitalize existent norms; or [contribute] to the emergence of new norms. In this sense, social conflict is a mechanism for adjustment of norms adequate to new conditions” (Coser, 1957, p. 154). Recent work in conflict theory emphasizes the role of conflict for democracy (Comtesse, Flügel-Martinsen, Martinsen, & Nonhoff, 2019). Most prominent here is the argument supported in the work of Mouffe (2014), and more recently in planning theory (e.g., Pløger, 2017): Democracy is best understood as ‘agonistic pluralism.’ Conflicts cannot—and should not—be eliminated, as the acceptance and legitimation of conflicts is precisely what characterizes pluralism, and thus pluralistic democracy (Mouffe, 2014).

Many scholars define institutions to be either “formal—such as laws, procedures, contracts, statutes etc.—or informal—such as norms, conventions, traditions, routines etc.” (Evenhuis, 2017, p. 511). These formal and informal rules structure the interaction between actors. Kingston and Caballero (2009) suggest that “institutions are resistant to change, in part due to people’s emotional attachment to existing institutions, and in part because change threatens existing patterns of status, wealth, and power” (Kingston & Caballero, 2009, p. 166; Steinmo, 2008, p. 129). However, “There is no consensus on how to conceptualize either institutions themselves

or the process of institutional change” (Kingston & Caballero, 2009, p. 151). Institutional theorists disagree on assumptions about why institutional change is triggered, often emphasizing stability rather than change. Kingston and Caballero (2009, p. 156) suggest that “institutional change is usually incremental since it is often easier to achieve consensus on small adjustments than to effect major changes to existing rules.”

Theories of institutional change usually distinguish between two approaches: intentional design or evolutionary development. Steinmo (2008, p. 133) suggests that “the evolutionary approach sees outcomes as contingent and non-predictable rather than linear and predictable.” Mahoney and Thelen (2010, p. 7) point out that the existing approaches “provide answers to what sustains institutions over time.” This explains why they are less focused on conflict but on stability. Knight (1992), however, is an exception along with a small group of historical institutionalists who “explore power relations and integrate agency into the analysis rather than seeing actors as prisoners of the institutions they inhabit” (Steinmo, 2008, p. 133). Knight (1992) links institutional change to the role of distributional conflict and power asymmetries. He challenges theories that emphasize the collective benefits of social institutions and instead follows the idea of the discriminating effects of social institutions: “According to this alternative approach, social institutions can be explained in terms of their beneficial effects on particular segments of the community. It suggests a central focus on the conflict of interests inherent in distributional questions” (Knight, 1992, p. 8).

We derived three points of interest from the literature of theories of institutional change. First, the role of power inequalities; second, the relevance of historical context; and third, the influence of endogenous and exogenous factors on the respective object of study. The study of ‘power inequalities’ as a means of explaining change is relatively common in conflict theory, but rarely appears in theories of institutional change. Many authors in this field consider:

Institutional change as a centralized, collective-choice process in which rules are explicitly specified by a collective political entity, such as the community or the state, and individuals and organizations engage in collective action, conflict, and bargaining to try to change these rules for their own benefit. (Kingston & Caballero, 2009, p. 155)

Knight (1992), on the other hand, argues that institutional change can be explained primarily by analyzing “how the asymmetries of power in a society influence the evolution of social institutions” (Knight, 1992, p. 14). This is where conflict theory comes in: “The sociological theory of conflict would do well to confine itself for the time being to an explanation of the frictions between the rulers and the ruled in given social structural organizations” (Dahrendorf, 1958, p. 173). While Dahrendorf and

Knight point to the necessity to consider power as a relevant category of conflict, Mahoney and Thelen (2010, p. 8) state that “institutional outcomes need not reflect the goals of any particular group”; institutional change can also occur as an unintended consequence. Hence, power and conflict influence institutions. The “outcome of conflict among groups” (Mahoney & Thelen, 2010, p. 8) need not be congruent with the goals of those involved in the conflict.

It is important to consider history in order to understand past policy decisions as a framework affecting actors’ identities, their attitudes toward change, their role in the policy negotiation process, and the array of viable alternatives (Kingston & Caballero, 2009, p. 156). On a sub-national level Evenhuis (2017, p. 522) shows that a path dependency approach “starts from the idea that changes in institutions build on and are conditioned by already existing institutions, through a dynamic and ongoing process.” Because of its particular attention to context and path dependence, historical institutionalism can be inspiring here. From its perspective, behavior, attitudes, and strategic decisions take place within a particular social, political, economic, and cultural context. History is not understood as a sequence of independent events. Rather, historical institutionalism emphasizes how different factors influence each other—therefore, authors of this body of literature are interested in the interdependencies and the multidimensionality of factors (Kingston & Caballero, 2009, p. 128): “Thus, by deepening and enriching their understanding of the historical moment and the actors within it, [these theorists] are able to offer more accurate explanations for the specific events that they explore” (Steinmo, 2008, p. 127).

Exogenous influences, like shocks, can be the impetus for institutional change (Kingston & Caballero, 2009, p. 168). Since institutions tend to be stable until confronted with them (Steinmo, 2008, p. 129), these institutions and involved actors need skills and routines to deal with exogenous influences. On an institutional level, little is known about these skills and routines. Thus, Kingston and Caballero (2009) pay attention to the individual level to analyze how actors process complex information. According to them, actors constantly process exogenous influences with the help of their bounded rationality. Forms of bounded rationality include communications skills, information processing skills, calculation skills, preference formation skills, and emotional skills. Consequently, institutions are considered the result of intentional human problem solving (Kingston & Caballero, 2009, p. 175). Kingston and Caballero however conclude that “further theoretical and empirical work is needed to clarify the role of bounded rationality, of collective and individual learning, and of endogenous preferences as drivers of, or impediments to, institutional change” (Kingston & Caballero, 2009, p. 178).

Initially, we conducted our research under the assumption that conflicts would provide stimulus for institutional change. Instead, we found that examining

conflict alone is not enough to understand change. Rather, for social conflicts the aforementioned interplay of power asymmetries, changing historical contexts, and the influence of exogenous factors and endogenous capacities helps to explain change.

3. Methods

Our contribution is based upon studies carried out as part of the BMBF-funded research project *MigraChance* (2018–2021). This project examines migration-related conflicts and their impact on institutional change in the three cities of Leipzig, Gelsenkirchen and Bebra. Research includes the reconstruction of two migration-related conflicts in each case study.

For Bebra, we analyzed the conflict over the Syriac-Orthodox church because it has been the main conflict around migration in this town, and everyone we'd ask about migration-related conflicts would mention the story of the church. The empirical data for our conflict analysis was gathered using a mixed-method approach, including qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2002); 15 guided interviews (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2014) with people involved in the conflict in the mid-1990s; 20 further on-site conversations; two local workshops; and data from personal and official archives as well as local newspapers. Further analyzed documents include draft resolutions; extracts from building and planning committees; district council resolutions; and documents like personal letters and notes. Based on these materials, we analyzed and mapped the elements of the conflict to understand its dynamics and institutional effects (Fisher, Abdi, & Ludin, 2007).

Generally speaking, we regard the reconstruction of conflicts as a difficult endeavour, since narratives surrounding them always represent certain perspectives. These narratives differ according to the position of speakers and represent a retrospective view of what happened. Therefore, there can never be a 'correct version' of the story of a conflict. This reveals that conflicts are difficult to describe merely in terms of 'what happened.' Conflict stories are perspective-based narratives of the experienced course of events. Being aware of this potential pitfall, we first describe the historical context of the case study and briefly introduce the circumstances under which the Syriac-Orthodox community found its way to Bebra. Focusing on the year 1996, we will then outline the polarizing conflict and include the main lines of the arguments in the debates. Following this, we reflect which social issues were negotiated during the course of the conflict, and which institutional changes occurred.

4. Case Study Bebra: Historical Context

Bebra is a small town in Northern Hesse with approximately 14,000 inhabitants (Hessian Land Statistical Office, 2020). Because of its location in the center of Germany, Bebra was one of the most important railway

hubs up until 1990 (Budnik et al., 2020). When Germany was still divided, Bebra was one of eight border-crossing points and handled the inter-zone passenger and freight traffic between the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. For readers unfamiliar with the context—after World War II, Germany had been divided into two states (1949–1990): the Federal Republic of Germany in the west and the German Democratic Republic in the east. Bebra was able to maintain a role as an important railway junction even during the division, despite its location at the edge of the Western zone. In addition, the municipality benefited financially from the so-called 'marginal zone funding.' The so-called 'zonal border area' received a high level of spatial planning attention and special funding within the framework of regional structural policy in order to compensate for the disadvantages caused by its location. This came to an end with reunification in 1990. Moreover, with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and construction, undertaken by the German Railway Corporation, of a new railway transit structure that passes Bebra without stopping there, the city lost its role for rail traffic. A process of deindustrialization began. The result was a significant loss of jobs. Where the German railway company once employed up to 4,000 people in the city, today only a few hundred workers remain (Tom, Former Mayor, Interview, 2018, October 16).

Bebra has had a long history of international immigration and with it a relatively high share of migrants for a small town. The first documented immigration to Bebra took place due to the expansion of the railway network in 1849 (Meng, 1969). One century later, following the recruitment agreements of the federal government with Italy in 1955 and even more so after similar agreements with Greece, Spain and Turkey in the early 1960s, immigration of migrant workers developed further, also in Bebra. These agreements aimed at meeting increased demand for labor in a time of economic growth and initiated the immigration of hundreds of thousands of so-called 'foreign guest workers' to Germany, whose stay was supposed to be temporary. Due to the so-called oil crisis and a worsening economy a 'recruitment ban' came into force in 1973 and many so-called 'guest workers' returned to their countries of origin. Still, the overall number of immigrants grew through the process of family reunification—as long as they were working in Germany, guest workers had the right to bring their families. The migrants who stayed increasingly rented or bought apartments in Bebra's inner-city neighborhoods, where comparatively cheap and less attractive living space was available.

From 1980 forward, asylum was the primary means by which migrants arrived. This was the result of an increase in forced migration, but also resulted from the lack of other legal possibilities for immigration to Germany. Later, the number of asylum-seeking Syriac-Orthodox Christians from Turkey rose to comprise 30%–40% of the total number of refugees (Sven, Former

Head of the Workers' Welfare Organization, Interview, 2019, June 25). Many of the latter already had some local contacts reaching back to Germany's guest worker period. In the early 1990s the share of the foreign population in Bebra was twice as high as in neighboring communities. From the 2000s onwards, the proportion of the foreign population decreased. Immigrants partly received German citizenship plus their children were born as German citizens, and also due to shrinking refugee migration to Germany, and an increasingly restrictive border regime. As a result of its enduring migration history, people from over 80 nations and their offspring are presently living in Bebra. While official local statistics encompass only the category of 'foreigner,' city officials assume 60% of newborns have a so-called 'migration background' when the national origin of grandparents has been taken into account (Tim, Former Director of the Local Youth Center, Interview, 2018, September 19).

The first members of the Christian Syriac-Orthodox community migrated to Bebra over the course of several decades from the Tur Abdin region at the border of Turkey and Syria. They first came as 'guest workers' between 1961 and 1973, while the worker agreement between Germany and Turkey was still in place. They later brought their families, enlarging the community within Germany through family reunification. Between 1973 and 1986, additional Syriac-Orthodox Christians applied for asylum, as the Turkish Muslim majority increasingly pressured Christians in the Tur Abdin region. In a key decision, the Hessian administrative court recognized the Christians living in the southeastern provinces of Turkey as being a persecuted group. According to the court, they were exposed to massive attacks by Turkish security forces because they, like the Kurdish civilian population, were suspected of supporting the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party, founded in 1978, which tried to separate from Turkey in order to establish an independent Kurdish state; "Turkish Christians are entitled to asylum," 1995; for a detailed overview and presentation of the empirical material, see Budnik et al., 2020). As persecuted Christians, there was no way back to Turkey for most of them. 143 Syriac-Orthodox Christians acquired German citizenship between 1985 and 1995 (City of Bebra, 1996).

5. The Conflict about the Construction of a Syriac-Orthodox Church

Since the 1970s, the Syriac-Orthodox community had been practicing their faith in the local Catholic Church upon the invitation of local Catholic leaders. The community began thinking about constructing their own church building in 1990, and they eventually bought farmland in 1994 with the help of the local Catholic and Protestant churches. There was no development plan for the purchased land. Therefore, the city of Bebra had to approve the change in land use status so that the building project could be implemented. At the beginning of 1996, the

decision on the change of the land-use plan was due for a vote by the city council.

The body rejected the change. The city council at first mainly addressed planning issues, e.g., the size of the project, traffic issues with agricultural vehicles and parking problems. Opponents of the project quickly expanded the topics to aspects of inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts and fears regarding living together. In a speech on behalf of the Christian Democratic Union, a city councilor pointed to the growing number of Muslims and Kurds and suggested that "gatherings of several thousand people with their religious opposites [have] a negative impact on our city, [and therefore] the local population is overwhelmed with that many cultural and religious contrasts" (City of Bebra, 1996b). A letter from the Syriac-Orthodox community to the Christian Democratic Union reconfirmed their intention to build a Christian church and not a mosque (Syriac-Orthodox Community, 1996). Additionally, they pointed out that "half of our parishioners are German citizens—with all duties and with all rights" (Syriac-Orthodox Community, 1996).

The atmosphere heated up. Public reporting and the mobilization of networks quickly expanded the circle of actors involved as well as the range of conflict issues addressed. Rapidly, the supporters' side organized itself and began building alliances beyond questions of national belonging in favor of religious belonging. The conflict polarized the urban society, which became clear through the two public information events in March and April 1996 at the latest. Contrary to the intention to contain the conflict, both events resulted in further hardening of the fronts, emotional stress and mutual accusations as this impression of a participant shows:

As a young person, there were tears in my eyes that evening. Supporters of the community center were booed, and were even interrupted....A look at the faces around me revealed such anger, such rage, [which] I have never experienced before. ("Never experienced such anger," 1996)

The dynamic led to increased threats and intimidation, especially against supporters of the church. They were increasingly "publicly insulted and harassed with anonymous threatening phone calls" (Schaaque, 1996). The number of public statements by local but also external politicians, private individuals and institutions increased significantly after the event.

Internal and external pressure on the local actors, and especially the newly appointed mayor (Christian Democratic Union), who has been elected in September 1995 and came into office in March 1996, increased. Proponents of the church repeatedly demanded objectivity. For example, the Green Party stated that "the polemical stirring up of emotions must be removed from the arsenal of political debate" ("Do not stir up emotions," 1996), and the Social Democratic Party warned

against an “emotional occupation of the topic” (“SPD warns,” 1996). Letters to the local newspaper, the mayor, and public letters from politicians with polarizing and emotional content appeared in the local press. A headline in the local newspaper about the search for a “home for the suffering church” can serve as one example of the charged atmosphere (“Planned community,” 1996). Readers’ letters said they were “horrified” that a Christian party was refusing a Christian church and commented that fear is “not a good advisor” (“CDU to refuse construction of a new church,” 1996). Supporting and opposing petitions followed. In addition, the church-supporting supra-regional media attention also grew. In 1996, one of the largest nationwide news services, *Der Spiegel*, ran a headline referencing a threatening phone call made to the head of the city parliament, a supporter of the church (“We’ll set your house on fire,” 1996).

The process so far had shown that public debate quickly escalated, making it difficult to find a solution or compromise. Politicians attempted to keep the topic out of the public. Therefore, further negotiations at the so called ‘roundtable’ took place in sessions closed from the general public and media. Participants agreed that only the moderator should inform the press about the status of negotiations. With the participation of representatives from the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democratic Party, the mediating churches and the Syriac Orthodox Christians, the congregation made new concessions regarding size and location of the church building. They joined forces to look for alternative locations. Eventually, the Christian Democratic Union got out of the negotiations and refused any further participation, which sidelined the issue until after upcoming municipal elections in 1997 (Protestant Church Council, 1996). After four sessions, the roundtable eventually failed in the summer of 1996, although the opponents had gradually gotten closer to reaching a compromise.

Public attention and excitement subsided. Almost all parties avoided raising the issue of the project in their election campaigns, thus preventing further escalation. Negotiations continued—albeit without the public’s knowledge—and the town administration examined alternative locations. From this point on, it is difficult to reconstruct further negotiations and mediations since no documents or media coverage are available, and interviewees would jump directly to the results of the resolution in their reconstructions. As far as we know, talks between the mayor and the Syriac-Orthodox community continued. Neither side made any statements to the press or the public on the status of the negotiations. In November 1997, the city council presented a compromise for the controversial church building: the conversion of the vacant former Federal Railway School, a training center for railway apprentices. Due to its location in the inner-city area, approval from the political parties in the city council was not required. After a year full of polarization, a lot of pressure and dissent

from outside for the local decision-makers, and some much needed time for rest and silence, almost all sides considered this location a success. The new location simultaneously opened up the possibility of giving in to public pressure and finding peace without losing face. The decision-makers, and above all the mayor, framed the compromise as a “good solution for everyone” from the start (Tom, Former Mayor, Interview, 2018, October 16). In particular, the mayor emphasized the urban development advantages for the city and minimized the probability of further conflicts. The open conflict came to an end at this point.

In 2002, the conversion of the Federal Railway School into a church was finally completed. Positive portrayals dominated the press and the statements of political decision-makers like the former mayor who stated that “everyone is satisfied” (Tom, Former Mayor, Interview, 2018, October 16). One journalist described the church building as a “highlight in the cityscape [which] is at the same time an upgrade for Bebra” (“New church to be consecrated tomorrow,” 2002). His editorial on the church building begins with the words:

The windows and doors were smashed, the roof broken—an eyesore in the middle of Bebra. The former Federal Railway School on Eisenacherstrasse in Bebra was threatened with becoming an eternal ruin. But thanks to the commitment of the Syriac-Orthodox Church and cultural association, the building has become a jewel. (“Joy over their own place of worship,” 2002)

6. Institutional Change

We will now discuss several aspects of institutional change related to this conflict, beginning with the role of institutions in the conflict dynamics. Following this, we will examine how the conflict correlates with changes in institutions with respect to the three dimensions derived from the literature review. In doing so, we will first consider the role of power asymmetries in the intended design of an institution for immigrants and, second, include the importance of alliance building for the implementation of the project. Thirdly, we take into account the institutional ways of dealing with the conflict, e.g., the role of the chosen dialogue formats. This endogenous procedure was influenced by exogenous forces on local institutional decision-making levels. Fourth, we will discuss short-term and long-term, small-scale institutional change and associated development of institutions.

The changing historical context in part explains the emergence of the manifest conflict. This changing context—meaning exogenous influences on local conditions like immigration or political change—challenged fixed institutional frameworks. Core aspects of the historical change in the 1990s were the intense process of deindustrialization due to German reunification, the loss of

Bebra's importance as a national railway junction (peripheralization), increasing refugee migration to Germany and Bebra, and the long-lasting stigmatization and devaluation of Bebra as a 'Turks town' (or worse) since the 1970s. Further, the nationwide racist discourses have to be taken into account—riots and mobilizations against migrants had begun already in the 1980s and peaked at the beginning of the 1990s, resulting in the implementation of far more restrictive immigration laws. For years, a controversial public and political debate on international immigration to Germany, recognition of the reality of post-war immigration (which conflicted with self-perception of an ethnically homogenous national state), and the conditions and future of the multicultural society had been going on at the national level. This broad discourse also dominated the 1995 mayoral campaign in Bebra, where the rejection of further immigrants and planned construction of a mosque had been controversially debated.

Conflicts like the case of the Syriac-Orthodox church reflect societal negotiation processes around local urban development in an increasingly plural society with changing balances of power. In the foreground of the conflict stands the intentional establishment of a religious institution, the Syriac-Orthodox church and community center. With regard to immigration, local politics is permeated by hegemonic claims of the host society. At the same time, it shows that the host society itself is divided between support for and rejection of a religious center to be built by immigrants. The immigrant group is surprised that these hegemonic claims and their enforcement are directed against them. At the same time, they also have allies with influence and power, namely the local churches. The alliance of Christian churches and Syriac-Orthodox immigrants also brings a powerful argument to the center of the discussion: the claim that the shared Christian religion is a more powerful source of legitimacy than the question of geographical origin. This is evident in the Syriac-Orthodox Christians' emphasis that they were building a church and not a mosque, thus hinting at a common line of identity. In this way, the emphasis on religious affiliation is used powerfully to set oneself apart from supposed religious minorities.

The conflict is an example of how exogenous and endogenous parameters influence local institutions and, therefore, the dynamics of the local conflict. Institutions like the municipal administration and government were challenged in dealing with the conflict. Exogenous parameters included, on the one hand, the increasing external pressure of social organizations, churches, NGOs and civil society actors, and alliances between regional and national institutions. The media, yet another institutional actor, played a key role. On the other hand, national and local laws were decisive. Building laws, together with the exact location of the envisioned church project, induced administrative procedures, which prolonged the planning process and made the church a matter for the local government. A different location for the

property would have resulted in different procedures, and an inner city location enabled rapid construction of the church. The dynamics of the conflict were fueled by campaigns in the coinciding mayoral election, which only took place due to a change in regional law. For the first time, the mayor was to be elected directly by the local citizens. Migration became a major issue in the election campaigns and preventing the construction of the Syriac-Orthodox church served as a litmus test for the Christian Democratic Union candidate who won. A big part of his success was rooted in the promises made about preventing further international immigration.

Skills and routines of actors in institutions such as election periods, public hearings and participation, and internal political competition intersected with the process of planning and deliberating on the church project. One such routine is to address conflicts with the organization of a public hearing. Here, a major endogenous learning process occurred because the hearings unintentionally contributed to the escalation of the conflict. The result was that institutions turned away from the general public; negotiations continued in camera without any external communication to the regional press or other external actors, thus shutting off external influences. The concept of bounded rationality may help explain this learning process. It may explain why the actors insisted on their veto of changes to the land-use plan, as they had a limited sense of the scope the conflict would bring to the city. It may explain the general population's resistance to change and their assumption that city politicians had to implement their desires, since politicians are believed to embody the will of the electorate (which opposed further immigration to the city). On the individual level, actors have learned that their skills to assess how the conflict would develop under increasing external influences are limited; and they have learned that their routines for orientation, their skills for communication and ways of handling information are limited, too. On an institutional level, institutions have learned to close themselves to the outside world in response to exogenous influences.

In the presented case, we saw an institutionalization of short-term formats like roundtables and information events, which aimed to resolve tensions but failed to do so. Long-term formats for encounters and exchanges were initiated, such as festivities and cultural exchanges like the 'intercultural weeks,' which continue to exist even after the manifest conflict has subsided. On the initiative of the Baptist pastor, it was decided to hold a joint prayer for the "peace process" (Ralph, member of a local religious community, Interview, 2019, July 15). Long-term establishment of dialogical formats, especially those with the goal of promoting 'intercultural exchange' like the working group Intercultural Life, were composed of representatives from different parties and faith communities. The foundation of these formats needed committed and strongly networked individuals. Years after the conflict, the former youth center director

was brought into the city's administration to fill the position for 'intergenerational coexistence.' He is considered a key figure in communication with migrant youth and families of all origins. With the help of his network function, the city administration acts at the interface between civil society, administration and politics. The most obvious institutional change is the Syriac-Orthodox church itself and the associated change of the immigrant's role in local society. Today, the community is a recognized part of the urban society. Thanks to them and other established migrant communities, the city was able to deal successfully and without larger conflicts with increasing arrivals of refugees from 2015 onwards. This growth has also led to a demographic stabilization of the number of inhabitants, which had been decreasing continuously in the years prior, following the regional trend. In the wake of this development, the city today represents itself as a 'prime example of integration' in the region.

7. Conclusion

In the course of migration-related conflicts, institutional change occurs as a process of adaptation to shifting societal realities, and has to be considered part of a broader societal transformation. Conflict stimulates a sometimes reluctant development of institutions (Steinmo, 2008). Our example shows that this change is not always spectacular and obvious. The analysis of institutions shows a tendency to refuse change and to keep the status quo after successfully dealing with conflicts. An immediate and direct effect on institutions and their development is hardly clearly visible. Accordingly, processes of institutional learning and change do not necessarily manifest themselves in a formally documentable way. They are rather gradual, small-scale and difficult-to-observe informal changes (e.g., change in action strategies, without direct restructuring or reorganization of institutions). According to Kingston and Caballero (2009), the common ways that institutions respond to challenges are shaped by external parameter shifts. We assume that, during the course of conflicts, there is always a complex structure of influencing external and endogenous factors that lead to iterative change processes in institutions (unless it is a matter of intentional design 'from above'). Institutional learning includes both the establishment of temporary exchange formats designed to resolve immediate conflict as well as long-term local meeting networks. It also includes strategic refusal to communicate, increasingly non-transparent action and the evasion of established institutions as a reaction towards exogenous influences.

In migration-related conflicts, actors negotiate the validity of norms and values (Coser, 1957) as well as locally changing power relations (Dahrendorf, 1958), by questioning and reaffirming the legitimacy of existing institutions. This negotiation is particularly linked to a changing social and historical context. The analysis of

the context indicates that migration itself is only one aspect—without necessarily being a condition—of the conflict's emergence. The simultaneity of experiences of crisis due to national and local societal changes thus influenced perceptions of immigration, and the ability to negotiate the changing roles of both long—and newly-established citizens. In this sense, migration-related conflicts can be understood as struggles over power (Knight, 1992), such as the local immigrants' push for recognition and participation. It is a struggle over the resources of participation and co-determination of further local development. These conflicts are processes determined by structural path dependencies, collective emotions, spatial conditions, values and attitudes, actors, their interests and relationships, and supra-regional discourses. The subsequent complexity of the conflict impedes the ways institutions will handle conflict.

Furthermore, well-known and established institutions of conflict resolution, like public information events and roundtables, can stand in the way of a more fundamental institutional change. To a limited extent, these tools are suitable to handle conflicts. However, their use in conflict situations is not always appropriate due to the emotional character of public conflicts. An information event can thus lead to open polarization and emotional stress, but does not provide the tools to deal with this. Negotiation is suppressed through the claim of objectivity (that resides in the instruments). Even though it contradicts common assumptions regarding communicative and participative planning, we observe that citizens' assemblies—as a type of institution for conflict resolution—can ultimately lead to further polarization instead of conflict resolution.

We consider the connection of conflicts and institutions to be relational in both directions at different scales. We observe interdependent, ambivalent interaction that co-produces these very conflicts and institutions. Conflict-solving institutions like roundtables or public hearings can contribute to the escalation of conflict dynamics rather than containing them. This dynamic is rooted in the intrinsic character of these formats. On the one hand, they are meant to serve the objective discussion of controversial public issues. On the other hand, they trigger polarization and emotionalization of social debates. Institutional formats for dealing with conflicts focus primarily on the rational side of conflict resolution and exclude debates about emerging emotions. The unspoken emotional injuries linger as latent tensions and thus further fuel the conflict. The analysis of migration-related conflicts can point out such grievances and draw attention to their effects on local societies and institutions. It remains an outstanding task to integrate the perspectives of emotional conflict resolution into existing institutional frameworks.

The analysis of local migration-related conflicts provides insights into the complex interdependencies between migration, conflict and institutional change. The analysis also reveals the difficulty in understanding

institutional change over a short period of observation. Institutional change is often a result of long-lasting processes rather than a sudden development. Research of local migration-related conflicts needs more scientific attention in order to better understand the role of historical context, changes in local power relations, and the inclusion of endogenous and exogenous influences on institutional change. For this purpose, more local empirical research should be conducted in the thematic field while also taking the emotional side of conflicts into consideration. The theoretical landscape would benefit from a dialogue between conflict theory and theories of institutional change in modern immigration societies in order to explain how local urban societies are subject to permanent institutional change.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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