

# Diversity in the City Council

Residents with an immigrant background make up around a quarter of the population in Germany's major cities. A team of scientists headed by **Karen Schönwälder** at the **Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity** in Göttingen has been investigating whether these inhabitants are adequately represented at City Hall. They have also been looking at the motives and conditions under which councilors with foreign roots involve themselves in politics, and the resentments they encounter.

TEXT **BIRGIT FENZEL**

**A**t the national and state government level in Germany, politicians with an immigrant background are no longer a rarity. Popular examples include Philipp Rösler, who came to Germany as a child from Vietnam and whose heady career has seen him become Federal Minister of Economics and chairman of the FDP; and the Ministers of Lower Saxony and Baden-Württemberg, Aygül Özkan and Bilkay Öney, and Green Party chairman Cem Özdemir, all of whom are of Turkish origin. The latter was first elected to the Bundestag in 1994, along with SPD member Leyla Onur, the first two Germans of Turkish descent to enter parliament.

But what about political involvement among people with an immigrant background at the grassroots level? This was one of the central questions addressed in a field study by political scientist Karen Schönwälder and her research group at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity. The project received financial support from the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Mercator Foundation.

In order to, first of all, arrive at some reliable figures on how many people with an immigrant background hold political office in Germany's city halls, the researchers in Göttingen began with an inventory of 77 cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants. They searched every list of candidates and elected councilors for the period from 2001 to March 2011 in search of individuals who either themselves arrived in Germany as first-generation immigrants or who were born of at least one immigrant parent. In the process, they analyzed the results of two local authority elections in every city.

## **"AN UPWARD TREND, BUT AT A LOW LEVEL"**

The results of this general inventory of city councils aroused interest above and beyond the scientific community – and not just because such a study had never been undertaken before. Its purpose was also to reveal the extent to which the institutions of democracy reflect the increasing diversity of our society.

In this respect, there have evidently been some changes in the past ten years. The study showed that, during

the period under investigation, the number of councilors with a migration background rose from 116 to 198. Similarly, the number of candidates for election rose by around 40 percent during this period. The researchers' findings also showed an increase in the number of cities in which immigrants were elected to the council, with several such representatives frequently joining the council at the same time. "In only 15 of the 77 cities were the councils uniformly composed of 'old-established' Germans, compared with 24 prior to 2001," says Karen Schönwälder. "That is a significant change, but not yet cause for euphoria." Given that over a quarter of big-city populations have an immigrant background, the fact that these segments account for a mere 4 percent of a total of 4,670 council members is far from sufficient. "We're seeing an upward trend here, but still at a low level," confirms social scientist Daniel Volkert, who, as a mem-

Frankfurt city council members with an immigration background: Eugenio Munoz del Rio, Imren Ergindemir, Mike Josef (SPD), Nimatoulaye Diallo, Onur Azcan, Hilime Arslaner (Greens), Ilias Galanos, Albina Nazarenus-Vetter (CDU), Merve Ayyıldız (Linke)





» None of the 77 cities have a proportion of immigrant councilors that matches the immigrant proportion of their populations.

ber of Karen Schönwälder’s research group at the Göttingen-based institute, is basing his dissertation on the project. The scientists also find it disconcerting that there are still cities, such as Mannheim, Heilbronn, Ingolstadt and Hagen, with a high immigrant population that is not represented by a single immigrant councilor.

### HIGH NUMBER OF COUNCILORS OF TURKISH ORIGIN STANDS OUT

The results of the study revealed large differences between the 77 cities. Leading the field is Frankfurt am Main, with no fewer than 15 council members with a migration background. Offenbach, with 9, Duisburg and Stuttgart, each with 8, and Ludwigshafen, with 6, are also well ahead. Among those cities on the rise are Bonn, Dortmund, Wiesbaden, Gelsenkirchen and Oberhausen, which, between the two elections, registered an increase in the number of councilors with foreign roots from 1 to as many as 5.

For political scientist Karen Schönwälder, the large differences between cities are an indication that the openness of political institutions is also dependent on the political culture, social movements and politics of the city concerned. Her impression is that “when an international city has a positive profile, this will, under the right circumstances, also be reflected in its council in the long term. Active immigrant ad-

visory committees and networks also play a positive role as a meeting ground for different political elites.”

But at the end of the day, Karen Schönwälder and her colleagues established that none of the 77 cities have a proportion of immigrant councilors that matches the immigrant proportion of their populations. From the scientist’s perspective, this is an untenable situation in a democracy. “In cities where, in some cases, over a third of the population are first-generation immigrants or descendants of immigrant families, the imbalance between social diversity and largely homogeneous parliaments must be overcome as a matter of urgency,” she emphasizes. One of the yardsticks of achievement in terms of equal opportunities and integration is the extent to which these segments of the population participate in political decisions. If large parts of the population are excluded from such participation, the principle of political equality that lies at the heart of democracy is at risk.

In addition to the number of local politicians with a migration background, the scientists also analyzed their biographical backgrounds. They found that the vast majority were first-generation immigrants, some of them arriving as children. Many came as dependants, or to study in Germany. “The high proportion of women struck us as particularly notable,” says Karen Schönwälder. While women still account for less than half of all councilors with an

immigrant background, at 40 percent, their proportion exceeds the overall ratio of female city councilors, which stands at 33 percent.

The study revealed large differences in the national origins of council members. “The large number of male and female councilors of Turkish origin stands out,” says socio-economics graduate Cihan Sinanoglu, who, like Daniel Volkert, is working on a doctorate centering on this research project. In the eyes of the researchers, this refutes the prejudiced view that citizens of Turkish origin are especially unwilling to integrate. Alongside Turkish immigrants, Europeans from elsewhere in the EU constitute the numerically dominant groups. There are also a series of council members originating from Africa and the Arab states. “But there is hardly anyone from, for instance, Southeast Asia,” Karen Schönwälder has found.

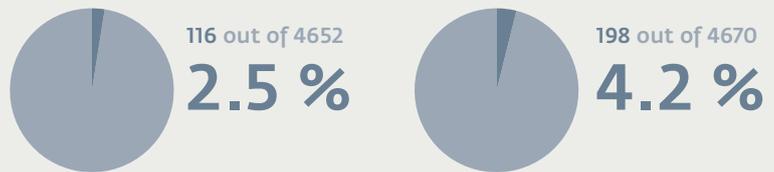
As diverse as the individuals, their origins and careers may be, the motives for their political activities and their self-image appear to be, in many cases, strikingly similar. “Most entered politics because they wanted to do something for their city,” says Karen Schönwälder. This much emerged from an analysis of the questionnaires sent, as part of the study, to all council members concerned. Together with around 30 personal interviews conducted by the team, the questionnaires provided information on the type of people who have made their way into local politics,

Left: Studying immigrants in political office: Research group leader Karen Schönwälder and doctoral students Daniel Volkert and Cihan Sinanoglu (from left) of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity.

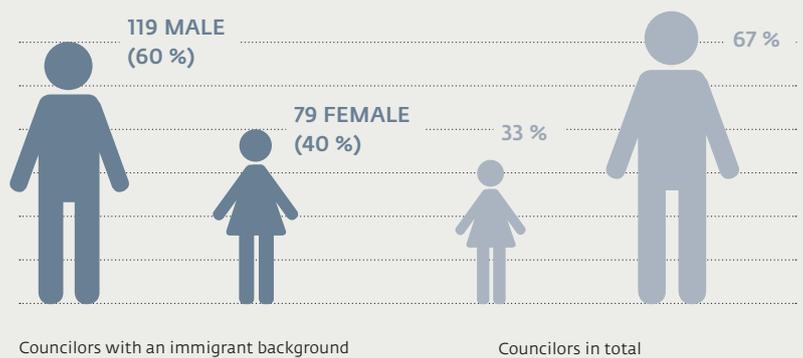
### The proportion of immigrant councilors is increasing

Local authority elections 2001 – 2006

Local authority elections 2006 – 2011



### The proportion of women among immigrant councilors is higher than in councils overall



how the political representatives of the immigrant population perceive their own career and conditions, and not least, also the obstacles they have to contend with.

The researchers were surprised by the strength of the response to their inquiries. “Over 60 percent completed and returned their questionnaires – normally the response rate is well below 50 percent.” As to why participation in the study should have been so enthusiastic, Karen Schönwälder can only speculate. “Maybe it was because we were the first to ask these things, or perhaps they were pleased that someone was finally taking an interest,” she suspects.

### POLITICALLY ACTIVE IMMIGRANTS ARE OFTEN HIGHLY EDUCATED

It also emerged that migrant workers and refugees are less prominently represented among politically active immigrants. By far the majority of those who make a career for themselves in local politics in their new homeland are highly educated. For example, 66 percent of councilors in the sample have a university degree. Frequently, they are “educational climbers”: over half of their parents had little or no school education.

Before their election, many immigrant councilors were involved in trade unions, school and university student representative bodies, community activist groups or other political groups. >

City	Number of councilors with an immigrant background	Proportion of all council members (%)
Frankfurt a. M.	15	16.1
Stuttgart	8	13.3
Offenbach	9	12.7
Duisburg	8	10.8
Ludwigshafen	6	10.0
Ulm	4	10.0
Munich	7	8.8
Düsseldorf	8	8.7
Wolfsburg	4	8.7
Nuremberg	6	8.6

City	Number of councilors with an immigrant background	Share of population with an immigrant background (%)
Heilbronn	0	45
Pforzheim	0	43
Ingolstadt	0	40
Mannheim	0	38
Hagen	0	34

» You feel lost, as though you don't belong. You know no one and you feel terribly inhibited in joining.

As the study showed, the route to the council chamber often lies through involvement in an immigrant advisory or integration committee. Only 36 percent were elected to the council without previously having held party office.

In the interviews, many reported a feeling of exclusion coupled with these first party experiences. "You feel lost, as though you are out of place. You know no one and you feel terribly inhibited in joining. And it takes a while before you warm up, so to speak," reported one interviewee. In principle, however, the participants in the study described the way they were accepted as positive. "Those who we surveyed largely see themselves as respected by other councilors. They regard their nomination as recognition of their competence and popularity," notes Cihan Sinanoglu.

**RIGID ALLOCATION OF ROLES ALLOWS LITTLE LATITUDE**

"Nevertheless, they see it as a problem when they are put under external pressure to concentrate exclusively on the

political issues of immigration and integration," he continues. Although immigrant councilors, through their experience and education, have a wide range of knowledge and skills, they have limited opportunity to use them in the political arena. Around 35 percent reported problems in being recognized as experts in matters outside of immigration and integration. This allocation of roles conflicts with the way many of those surveyed see themselves. Summarizing the councilors' feelings, the Göttingen-based research group leader explains: "They don't want to be restricted to an immigration role."

On the other hand, quite a few of the interviewees were somewhat ambivalent on this issue. One commented: "Fifteen years ago, I was angry at being pushed into something. But in the end, it was an opportunity to qualify myself for other things." Almost two-thirds of council members with an immigrant background described themselves as satisfied at having achieved something for the immigrant population. Even councilors whose foreign or-

igin is not central to their own self-awareness – something that applies to around two-thirds of the entire group – specifically target parts of their electoral campaigns at immigrant voters.

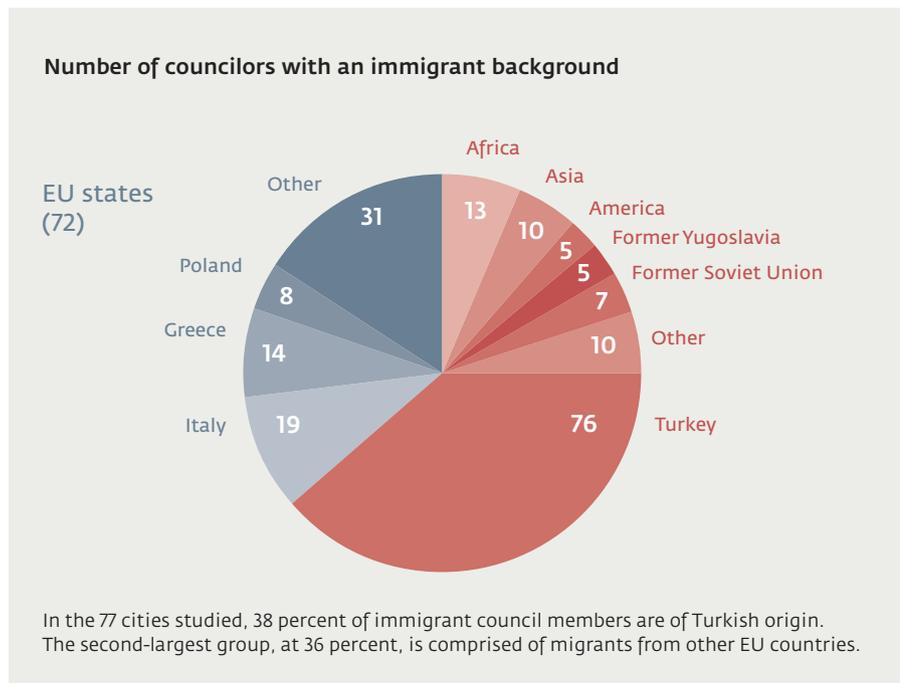
At election time, but not only then, local politicians with a migration background may encounter open resentment against their origin. When one participant in the study was handing out leaflets in the street, someone snapped at him: "Beat it. Haven't you people got more important things to do, like feeding your own people, instead of running in an election here?"

**MORE DIFFICULT TO TAKE PART**

In interviews with the researchers, 26 percent reported receiving negative or discriminatory comments in connection with their political activities – some even voiced by traditional party members. One interviewee recalled comments in the early days such as: "What's a black head doing here? Isn't he in the wrong place?" or "Well, who's this, then?" Ultimately he was nevertheless accepted: "In the end, some remarked, 'Well, you speak good German.'" Another participant in the study related how, while no one was directly hostile to him, he frequently overheard seemingly harmless banter. As he put it, "Things that are said in jest can often be meant in earnest." To his ears, being called "you Austrian" was degrading.

According to Karen Schönwälder, such experiences were common to male and female members of all parties and differing national origins. However, those concerned described these negative experiences as never overwhelming in and of themselves. After all, no one likes to present themselves as a victim. "It was much more the case in our observations that the experiences highlighted were positive ones," says the scientist.

Nevertheless, the authors of the study believe that negative attitudes toward certain immigrant groups are



among the factors that make it more difficult for citizens with an immigrant background to take part in politics. The fact that people with an immigrant background, who collectively make up over a quarter of big-city populations, constitute just 4 percent of those sitting in the council chamber – in the opinion of Karen Schönwälder and her colleagues – is an indicator of deeper underlying structural causes.

“The process of immigration itself means that immigrants must first become acquainted with a new political system and its institutions.” Another barrier exists in the fact that some initially – or even over an extended period – possess only limited political rights. Many also suffer the disadvantage of belonging to economically weaker segments of the population. “Time and money make it easier to assume a political mandate.” Here, too, the political scientist sees a need for action, insofar as a democracy can’t allow itself to offer opportunities solely to those who are well off. Her recommendation to German society: “If the level of representation of the immigrant population is to be significantly increased, such structural contexts must not be overlooked.”

### IMMIGRANT QUOTA OF 15 PERCENT PLANNED

Above all, the mainstream political parties have some ground to make up – an opinion shared by many participants in the study. “Most thought that their party should do more to enable people with a migration background to play an equal role in party affairs,” says Daniel Volkert. The SPD was quick to recruit people of non-German origin, but they occupy hardly any leadership positions. Social Democrat party chief Sigmar Gabriel recently admitted as much when he remarked that, of the 14 percent of his party members who are immigrants, not one can be found on the SPD steering committee or the party executive.



When they acquire citizenship, immigrants also acquire the right to vote in all elections and stand for parliament and city councils. Thus far, however, only very few immigrants hold office as city councilors in Germany.

Karen Schönwälder believes that the FDP and CDU also need to catch up. “The FDP could be an attractive prospect for highly qualified EU migrants, and the CDU has large numbers of supporters among ethnic German immigrants. But what elected or party offices do they hold?” Still, there seems to be some movement. As SPD party chief Sigmar Gabriel and Secretary General Andrea Nahles announced after a meeting of the party’s steering committee, they are planning to introduce an immigrant quota. A voluntary commitment to a minimum 15 percent target on federal party committees was adopted at the party conference in early December.

What effects this resolution will have at the local level remains to be seen. On the other hand, broadening the participation and co-determination practiced by all segments of a city’s population in the interests of democratic equality is not, in Karen Schönwälder’s opinion, a task for the political parties alone: “Diversity within political institutions is a project that concerns the whole of society.” ◀

### GLOSSARY

#### Voting rights in local authority elections

In Germany, apart from German nationals, only citizens of other EU states have the right to vote in local authority elections, provided they were registered in the corresponding local authority area at least three months prior to the poll. They are entitled to hold council office even without German citizenship.

#### Migration background

A concept that overcomes the restriction of previous terms to non-German nationals only and includes all immigrants and their children. This group is variously defined. The Federal Statistical Office categorizes “all persons who migrated to the present territory of the Federal Republic of Germany after 1949 and all non-German citizens born in Germany, and all those born in Germany as German citizens with at least one parent who migrated to Germany after 1949 or was born in Germany as a non-German citizen” as a single group.

#### Primary immigrants

Those who leave their country of origin in order to live in another country are described as first-generation immigrants. The children of such immigrants are described as second-generation immigrants.