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Small towns and their surroundings in the context of local government reorganisation. Results from Schleswig-Holstein (Germany)

Abstract: The importance of small towns for stabilising and supporting the development of rural regions is being gradually recognised in spatial research and planning. This paper discusses the status of small towns in local administrative reform processes. It is based on the example of reform processes that were carried out in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein. At the end of this process, the small towns found themselves in very different political and administrative constellations with respect to neighbouring districts. Strengthening towns as central service locations was not part of the state's plans for reform. In several cases, even if a town had an efficient administration, the surrounding municipalities were not prepared to entrust their administration to the town, but rather perpetuated duplicate structures in a local “collar” district administration around the town. Steps for better efficiency and specialisation of employees were not implemented. It became clear that many small municipalities did not want to be administered by towns. As a final result, the concerns of the small towns were not taken into account sufficiently in the reform processes in question.

Key words: small towns, local government reorganisation, urban regions, collaboration between towns and neighbouring municipalities, merger of municipalities

Introduction

Small towns in spatial development

The importance of small towns for stabilising and supporting the development of rural regions is being gradually recognised in spatial research and planning. An ESPON study presented in 2006 still concluded that no systematic study of small and medium-sized towns had been undertaken, “although policy making increasingly refers to them” (ESPON 2006, p. 14). Since then, research in this area has increased significantly. Accordingly, a Danish research project in 2015 came to the following conclusion: “[...] research from around Europe shows

a great diversity of small town development, including successful development trajectories despite geographical disadvantages” (Fertner et al. 2015, p. 119). A relevant publication on small towns in Central and Eastern Europe was presented by Burdack and Kriszan (2013). Also in German-speaking countries, small and medium-sized towns have attracted increased attention in spatial studies (cf. Kaufmann, Meili 2019). Recently, interest in “specific as well as systematic small town research” has been clearly formulated (Porsche, Milbert 2018, p. 6). With regard to spatial planning and regional development, the anchor function of small and medium-sized towns, especially in rural areas, is now also recognised in Germany¹.

This paper will discuss the status of small towns in various processes of reorganising local governments. It is based on the example of reform processes carried out between 2004 and 2008 in the German state of Schleswig-Holstein. At the end of this process, the small towns in the state found themselves in very different political and administrative constellations with respect to neighbouring districts. The present study is part of ongoing work by the author on the relationship between small towns and their surrounding areas, work that also includes recent papers published on the function of towns in regional development in Schleswig-Holstein (Prieb 2019), and on cooperative structures between small towns in Austria and their neighbouring rural districts (Schorn, Prieb 2021).

This paper focuses on the following questions:

- What have been the effects of the recent reforms of local government structures in Schleswig-Holstein regarding the status of small towns in rural areas?
- What types of constellations have emerged between towns and neighbouring areas?
- What conclusions can be drawn regarding the relationship between towns and surrounding areas?

The empirical basis of the paper was an analysis of documents and media reports, supplemented by ten semi-structured interviews. The partners in these interviews were mayors, experts from local governments, a senior official from the State Planning Authority of Schleswig-Holstein and the Executive Director of the Association of Towns. A central document was the detailed report of the State Audit Office (Landesrechnungshof Schleswig-Holstein) from 2014.

Small towns and their surroundings

The problems between larger towns and cities and their surrounding areas have been an object of discussion in spatial research and planning for decades. However, there has been little interest in small towns; the focus has been nearly exclusively on urban metropolitan areas (with a few exceptions; see for example Purkarthofer, Humer 2019). Small towns are also often overlooked in discussions or policies aimed at strengthening rural areas, because here the focus is often

¹ Cf. Raumwissenschaftliches Kolloquium 2019 “Anker im Raum? Klein- und Mittelstädte in strukturschwachen Regionen”, held 28 February 2019 at the Leibniz-Gemeinschaft in Berlin; see also: Danielzyk and Prieb (2020).

on questions such as village development or agriculture. Overall, there seems to be little understanding of or interest in the interdependence between small towns in rural regions and their surrounding areas. Towns are often viewed with distrust by nearby villages due to fear of paternalism. Indeed, the close interdependency of villages and small towns is often underestimated, especially in the case of small-scale local government structures. A counter-example can be seen in the motto “Centres need regions – regions need centres”, used at the 9th Austrian Urban Regions Day in 2019². Indeed, this dependency is mutual: areas surrounding towns are highly dependent on those towns’ services, goods and supplies, and jobs. However, towns are highly dependent on decisions made by surrounding areas with regard to land use development, transport issues and recreation areas.

Different structures of local government in international comparison

Although municipalities³ are a basic component of state structures everywhere in Europe, there are clear differences in their size, competencies and political control in different European areas. In Northern Europe as well as Scotland, large and efficient municipalities are generally found, while in other countries, such as France and Austria, there are predominantly smaller divisions and local governments with close contact between responsible persons and citizens. There are considerable differences between municipalities within Germany. While Germany’s most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia (17.9 million inhabitants), has 396 municipalities, the small state of Schleswig-Holstein (2.9 million inhabitants) has 1,100 municipalities (status 2022). The reasons for these differences have to do with political assessments of local government structures: the focus is either on manageability and proximity to citizens, or on performance, technical specialisation and business efficiency. When making comparisons, however, it must also be taken into account that in Germany, small municipalities usually do not carry out their own administration; voluntary cooperation and statutory administrative associations are the rule.

Small towns in the local government system of Schleswig-Holstein

Schleswig-Holstein, the northernmost German state, borders on the Kingdom of Denmark. While most of the western German states underwent comprehensive local government reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, this was not the case in Schleswig-Holstein. Its large number of independent municipalities also means that very small units exist to this day, including municipalities with fewer than

² <https://www.staedtebund.gv.at/services/aktuelles/aktuelles-details/artikel/7-oesterreichischer-stadtregionstag-wiener-neustadt/>.

³ In this paper, the term “municipality” refers to the smallest administrative division of government in a country.

seventy inhabitants where citizens' assemblies take the place of an elected municipal council. The smallest municipality, the island (Hallig) of Gröde, has ten inhabitants (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of inhabitants in the municipalities (without county boroughs, 31 March 2011)

Population	No. of Municipalities	Percentage
< 1,000	721	65
1,000–3,999	282	25
4,000–7,999	45	4
> 8,000	64	6
Total	1,112	100

Source: Landesrechnungshof (2014).

Due to the different sizes of municipalities in the state of Schleswig-Holstein, these municipalities also have different forms of local administration. In addition to municipalities (including towns) with their own administrations, joint local districts (“Ämter”) were set up in 1947 as inter-municipal institutions to manage the affairs of smaller municipalities. These joint districts are not political units and do not have elected councils, but they do have decision-making boards made up of committees, with the municipality heads as members⁴. In total, in Schleswig-Holstein there are 145 administrative units (municipalities with their own administration or joint local district administrations). For the most part, these administrative units perform identical tasks. According to the constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany, the tasks of local communities include local planning, social affairs, ownership and running of schools and kindergartens, fire protection and sewage disposal. In addition, they also perform state tasks, such as recordkeeping and public order.

Particularly in view of the border position of Schleswig-Holstein, a comparison with the municipal structures in neighbouring Denmark is interesting. In 2007 the number of municipalities in Denmark (5.8 million inhabitants) was reduced to only 98. This means that although the spatial structures are similar on either side of the border, there are very different local government systems. Against this background, it is understandable that the SSW (“Südschleswigscher Wählerverband”, South-Schleswig Voter’s Association), the political party of the Danish population of Schleswig-Holstein, is critical of the small-scale municipal structure of Schleswig-Holstein. They have recently called for abolishing joint local districts and forming larger strong municipalities⁵.

⁴ In Germany, not only do the heads of cities and towns bear the title “Bürgermeister” (mayor), this is also the title of the heads of municipalities, even the smallest. In this paper however, in the case of municipalities the term “municipality head” will be used.

⁵ Südschleswigscher Wählerverband (SSW): Starke und größere Kommunen braucht das Land. Press release, 1 Nov. 2016.

Local government reform in Schleswig-Holstein 2004–2008

General conditions

Because the local government structure of Schleswig-Holstein had not changed substantially since the 1970s, discussions were initiated at the beginning of the 2000s about needed reforms, especially at the level of municipalities and counties. While some larger units had been formed at the county level in Schleswig-Holstein in 1970 and 1974, as was done in other federal states in Germany, for the most part the state stuck to very small-scale local government structures. Before the reform process began in 2002, Schleswig-Holstein had 1,130 independent municipalities in 11 counties, as well as 4 county boroughs. While 100 municipalities had their own administration and did not belong to a joint local district, 1,026 municipalities were administered by 117 joint local districts. Administration at the local level was thus carried out by 221 administrative units, supplemented by the supra-local administrations of the 11 counties. These county administrative bodies are not examined in this paper.

The discussion that began in 2002 on needed reforms of local government structures and the size of local administrations received significant impetus from a special report published in 2003 by the State Audit Office that contained fundamental and broad criticism of the existing local government structures in Schleswig-Holstein. The State Audit Office pointed out that 55% of the local administrations served fewer than 9,000 inhabitants, showing the small-scale nature not only of the municipalities, but also of the joint local districts. From an economic point of view, the State Audit Office considered the optimal size of a joint local district to be at least 9,000 inhabitants (Landesrechnungshof 2003, p. 11). It also saw an urgent need for action with regard to the so-called *Kragenämter* (“collar administrations”): groups of municipalities administered by a joint local district forming a geographical “collar” around a town (Landesrechnungshof 2003, p. 12). In this context, the State Audit Office also saw considerable need for action in developing cooperative action structures in urban–suburban areas (State Audit Office 2003, p. 24). In another report two years later, the State Audit Office emphasised that “mergers of full-time administrations are indispensable” for increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of small administrations (Landesrechnungshof 2005, p. 71).

Requirements of the state government and state parliament for administrative reform

The state government also recognised that the local government structures did not meet the requirements for effective and efficient local administration. To begin the reform process, the coalition government between the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD, Germany’s Social Democratic Party) and the

Green Party issued guidelines for the future administrative structures in 2004. These were revised the following year after a change in parliamentary majorities and the formation of a new coalition government between the SPD and the Christlich-Demokratische Union (CDU, Christian-Democratic Union) (Landesregierung 2005). In 2006, the state parliament passed two laws on a local government reform that bound the municipalities to the reform process. Local administrations were to become larger, more professional, closer to the citizens, and more economical. Moreover, the number of local administrations was to be reduced. In the process, all local administrations were to have at least 8,000 inhabitants by the time local elections were held in 2008. The reforms had to take into account the interdependencies between the municipalities. However, the state government gave priority to voluntary mergers. Until 1 April 2007, financial incentives were offered in the form of a €250,000 reward for each local government unit that was abolished. If the targets were not met, the state government announced that it would undertake the merging of joint administrative districts itself⁶.

Actors and their strategic goals

The actors involved in the reform process pursued quite different goals. The state government and parliament were concerned with the economic efficiency of administrative bodies. This was considered only possible for administrative units of at least 8,000 inhabitants. While the state's guidelines called for attention to be given to spatial interdependency, it did not specifically address the role of centrally located towns. The Association of Towns emphasised the role of small towns, which the state planning authority had assigned the function of "Zentrale Orte" ("central places" with special supply tasks for surrounding areas)⁷. A key demand of the association was that the reforms "not lead to a weakening of the administrative power of towns – especially towns in rural areas"⁸. In contrast, the Association of Small Municipalities emphasised the need for proximity to citizens and the independence of municipalities to enable them to make decisions adapted to local situations. It spoke out against "centrist efforts seeking in particular to bundle the administration also of rural areas into the larger central towns"⁹. In several cases, the heads of small municipalities feared external control from a central town¹⁰. The Association of Counties (Landkreistag) warned

⁶ Gesetz zur Reform kommunaler Verwaltungsstrukturen (Erstes Verwaltungsstrukturreformgesetz), 28 March 2006, GVOBl. Schl.-H., p. 28; Zweites Gesetz zur Reform kommunaler Verwaltungsstrukturen (Zweites Verwaltungsstrukturreformgesetz), 14 Dec. 2006, GVOBl. Schl.-H., p. 278.

⁷ Interview with the managing director of Städteverband (Association of Towns) Schleswig-Holstein on 26 September 2019.

⁸ Städteverband Schleswig-Holstein (ed.): 2. Städtetage des Städteverbandes Schleswig-Holstein – Dokumentation. Schriftenreihe des Städteverbandes Schleswig-Holstein, Heft 13, 2013, p. 9.

⁹ Opening words at the Schleswig-Holsteinischer Gemeindegtag 2004.

¹⁰ Interview with the mayor of the town of Niebüll on 6 May 2021.

against joint local districts that were too large, i.e., with more than 20,000 inhabitants, because it saw this as weakening both the municipalities and the counties (Erps 2006, p. 14).

Among the state's political parties, there were different opinions regarding the administrative reforms. The two major governing parties, CDU and SPD, supported the reform approaches. In contrast, the SSW, the party of the ethnically Danish population, was critical of the state government's approach; in the opinion of the SSW, a clear overall concept for the local government reforms was missing¹¹. A far-reaching reform proposal was already made in 2003/2004 by the Green Party, which advocated an overall structure of five regions/counties and local administrative units with at least 20,000 inhabitants, a proposal that fuelled the reform discussions¹². Nonetheless, despite arguing them well, the Greens remained largely alone with their ideas. For most political parties, local government reforms were not considered a campaign winning issue.

The reform proposals and measures were discussed intensively by the general public and in the media. However, the discussion lacked an edge due to the fact that it was primarily about increasing efficiency and merging administrations. In general, the existence of individual municipalities was not questioned. The discussion was thus led more by politicians and experts than by the general public.

Results of the reform with regard to small towns

As the central result of the local government reforms in Schleswig-Holstein, between 2002 and 2011 the number of local administrations was reduced from 217 to 140, including the number of joint local district administrations, which were reduced from 117 to 76 (see Table 1). The state government's goal of forming administrative units of at least 8,000 inhabitants was achieved. However, the high degree of voluntarism led to very different regional results. The number of municipalities per joint local district now varies between 3 and 35. The formation of the Südtondern joint local district (Amt Südtondern) should be highlighted as an outstanding outcome. Here the town of Niebüll and 29 other municipalities established a joint local district with almost 40,000 inhabitants. As a curiosity, it should be mentioned that the law also enabled small joint districts to survive by allowing them to collaborate with another economically efficient administration. As a result, after the reforms, it was possible for joint local districts with small numbers of inhabitants to continue to exist, such as the joint local district of Kapeln-Land, with only about 1,600 inhabitants. In such cases, the local districts do not run their own administrations, but instead use the administration of a nearby town (see the overview of the reform results in Bülow 2009).

¹¹ Südschleswigscher Wählerverband (SSW): Verwaltungsreform: Effizienz, Entbürokratisierung und Einsparungen? Fehlanzeige! Press release, 16 Jan. 2006.

¹² Bündnis90/Die Grünen, Landesverband Schleswig-Holstein: Ein Diskussionsvorschlag für eine Verwaltungsstrukturreform in Schleswig-Holstein. Bericht der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Verwaltungsstrukturreform. 8 Jan. 2004.

Table 2. Results of the local government reorganization in Schleswig-Holstein (numbers without county boroughs)

	2002	2011
Municipalities with their own administration (excluding towns)	45	21
Number of towns with their own administration	55	43
Number of joint local district administrations	117	76
In total: Number of local administration units	217	140
Average number of inhabitants per administrative unit	9,900	15,100
Number of inhabitants in the smallest administrative unit	1,378	8,020
Number of municipalities (excl. towns) belonging to a joint local district	1,023	1,024
Number of towns belonging to a joint local district	3	14

Source: Landesrechnungshof (2014).

Another possibility was to establish larger municipalities by merging smaller ones. This possibility was hardly used – the total number of municipalities was reduced by only 14, from 1,130 to 1,116 (including 4 county boroughs). Examples of mergers in Schleswig-Holstein were the incorporation of the municipality of Schobüll into the town of Husum, and the special case of the merger of the municipalities on the island of Fehmarn. The latter will be discussed in more detail below.

With regard to the relationship between small towns and their surrounding areas, the questionable strengthening of “collar districts” must be seen as a special feature of the reform process. As described above, many municipalities with joint local districts were arranged geographically like rings or collars around towns. The State Audit Office had already expressed its disapproval of this constellation prior to the reforms. However, during the reform process, many municipalities near small towns decided against merging their joint local district with the town administration, instead keeping their own administration alongside that of the town (Landesrechnungshof 2014, p. 67). Although the administration of the joint local districts are usually located within such towns, the towns themselves have their own administrations. As a result, two independent local government institutions are in close proximity (town administration and joint local district administration), despite being organised completely independently and usually not having any cooperative functions. After the reforms were completed, the continuation and even the strengthening of such “collar administrations” was a major criticism of the State Audit Office, which continued to stress the high economic savings potential of combining administrative bodies. It thus saw an urgent need for action in these cases. The State Audit Office’s criticism of the lack of compliance with its recommendations was correspondingly harsh. Nonetheless, the State Audit Office understood that decades of conflicts between the towns, rural municipalities and joint local districts were a reason for continuing duplicate structures (State Audit Office 2014, p. 19).

Since the reforms were primarily voluntary, this meant that the demarcation of new administrative units was not based on methodical criteria, structural interdependency or considerations of spatial planning. This type of planning would

have required a strong state influence, which politically was considered undesirable. In the years following the reorganisation, however, a number of inter-municipal collaborations were formed that were based to a greater extent on spatial interdependency and planning.

In the following, the main administrative constellations of small towns and their surrounding areas since the reform will be presented.

Different administrative constellations of small towns and surrounding municipalities

Parallel structures through separate administrations for the town and its “collar” district

In this constellation, the municipalities in the area surrounding a town are members of a “collar” joint local district. The group of “collar” municipalities and the centrally located town have independent administrations. Before the reform, there were 30 such cases, but even after the reforms there were still 16 cases of parallel administrations in Schleswig-Holstein. In the meantime, 9 of these “collar districts” have remained unchanged, while 5 have become even larger.

In this constellation, two administrations exist side by side, often located within a short distance of one another, and they have largely identical responsibilities for their respective regions. The location of the “collar” district’s administration in the central town means that its administrative offices are “extraterritorial”, that is, not located in any of its member municipalities. This makes it more centrally located for the area it serves. The main points of criticism of this constellation are the parallel structures of town administration and joint local district administrations and the synergies that are thus missed. Several towns are also part of such constellations – Bad Segeberg, Eckernförde, Heide, Itzehoe and Ratzeburg – which, as medium-sized centres, have a state planning mandate to assume supply functions for their surrounding areas. However, their town administrations are not allowed to use their administrative strength for managing the surrounding rural areas.

According to the State Audit Office, the Ministry of the Interior was also critical of this situation, but nevertheless did not prohibit it with targeted regulation (Landesrechnungshof 2014, p. 21). From the point of view of administrative efficiency and strengthening local administrative effectiveness, the question remains as to why possible synergies in terms of personnel and expertise were not taken advantage of. When a municipal administration is responsible for a larger area, the higher numbers of cases it deals with make it possible for tasks to be carried out by specialised personnel. As mentioned above, the State Audit Office has assumed that extraneous considerations, such as differences in viewpoint between the institutions involved, played a role.

An example of this type of constellation with parallel structures is in the Rendsburg-Eckernförde County the town of Eckernförde (22,000 inhabitants) and the Schlei-Ostsee joint local district (18,845 inhabitants). The Schlei-Ostsee district, with its 19 municipalities, was created on 1 January 2008 by the merger of three former municipality groups. The district represents significant parts of the direct service area of Eckernförde. This means that there are two independent administrative units in a closely interwoven region. Although they have a large number of identical tasks and are both located in the town of Eckernförde, they are clearly separated, both spatially and organisationally.

A town gives up its own administration and becomes a member of a joint local district

In this constellation, the central town becomes part of the previous “collar” district and gives up its own administration. This means that the town turns over its administrative tasks to the joint local district. There were twelve cases of this type as a result of the reforms in Schleswig-Holstein. In most cases it was central towns with fewer than 8,000 inhabitants that were involved, as for example the small town of Wilster (4,500 inhabitants). Wilster was not geographically incorporated into the Wilstermarsch joint local district, but its administration has been taken over by the joint local district. The negotiating position of such towns was poor, since unlike most of the local districts, they did not have the minimum limit of 8,000 inhabitants set by the state. Most local districts rejected the creation of an administrative community together with towns, or having a town take over the district’s administration (Landesrechnungshof 2014, p. 65). As a result, these small towns lost their own administrations and are now members of joint local districts, or are administered by a joint local district administration. An additional effect is that the villages of the surrounding areas now hold majorities in the political power structures.

Unique and thus particularly interesting is the case of the town of Niebüll and its surrounding district in the Nordfriesland County. In 2006, the town of Niebüll had about 9,000 inhabitants. At the time it also provided the administration of a neighbouring joint local district. As a result, the town’s administration provided services to approximately 13,000 inhabitants, which meant that there was no statutory need for action. Nevertheless, administrative reorganisation was also discussed here, since for economic reasons a substantially higher number of inhabitants was considered necessary. The aim was to create a joint local district of about 40,000 inhabitants, with a correspondingly efficient administration. The administrative district of Südtondern was thus formed, which included the town of Niebüll, the municipality of Leck, as well as 28 other municipalities that were part of 4 joint local districts.

It is noteworthy that the town of Niebüll and its mayor were strong advocates of this merger. Originally, the town’s offer to the neighbouring municipalities was based on the assumption that the municipal administration of Niebüll would

take over the administration of the entire joint local district. However, the town's proposal did not meet with the approval of all its neighbours. The goal was thus changed and the formation of a new joint local district with its own administration was sought. The town of Niebüll was prepared to give up its own administration (as was the municipality of Leck), but the town set some conditions. In particular, the joint local district was to have a professional, full-time management, and the town of Niebüll was to continue to have a full-time mayor. This was legally possible for municipalities with more than 4,000 inhabitants. Furthermore, the town of Niebüll expected weighted voting rights in the board of the joint local district. These ideas were largely realised with the formation at the beginning of 2008 of the new joint local district "Amt Südtondern", located in Niebüll. The weighted voting rights of the town of Niebüll were only realised later.

Although the mayor of Niebüll was strongly in favour of the merger at the time, he is now quite critical of the reforms. From the town's point of view, no truly unified administration has emerged and local self-interests continue to prevail. In his view, cooperation only works if it does not hurt the individual municipalities. Moreover, the town cannot take direct action on issues important for its development; it is always dependent on the actions of the joint local district, which, however, often has other priorities¹³. From the town's point of view, the merger of the district into a single large municipality would have been a better choice. However, such a solution is still not acceptable for the majority of the population in the Südtondern area, as shown by the negative reaction of various municipal heads after a proposal in 2015 by the SSW to form the large municipality of Südtondern¹⁴.

A town runs the administration of the neighbouring local district

In this constellation, the centrally located town does not become part of the surrounding district, as in the case of Südtondern, but conducts the business of the neighbouring or surrounding district together with its own town administration in an administrative community. In this way, economies of scale can be achieved. This largely avoids the disadvantages of a "collar" district that were pointed out by the State Audit Office in its report, because the town's administration is responsible for the entire area of the town as well as of its neighbouring municipalities. This constellation exists in the case of the town of Kappeln and the joint local district of Kappeln-Land (Schleswig-Flensburg County). An administrative community was established already in 1983 through a contract between the town and the joint local district. Since then, the mutual administration has been handled by the town's administration.

The same constellation exists in principle in the case of the town of Husum (approx. 23,000 inhabitants, Nordfriesland County) and the joint local district of Pellworm (approx. 1,400 inhabitants), which is responsible for several islands. The special feature of the Pellworm joint local district is that it contains four

¹³ Interview with the mayor of the town of Niebüll on 6 May 2021. See also: Bockholt 2020, 15.

¹⁴ Nordfriesland Tageblatt, 18 April 2015.

municipalities, each of which is an island. Here, the reform requirements made it necessary for Pellworm to cooperate with another administration because of the minimum required size of 8,000 inhabitants. As a result, cooperation with the town of Husum was chosen, even though there is no direct geographical proximity between the Pellworm district and Husum. Since 2008, the employees of the Pellworm district have been part of the Husum municipal administration, but certain administrative services for the small islands (Halligen) of Gröde, Hooge and Langeness, which are municipalities of their own, as well as for the municipality of Pellworm are still provided on the island of Pellworm. In this case, it is difficult to achieve synergies due to the special topographical situation. The advantages for the town of Husum are vague, whether regarding its centrality or any resultant administrative efficiency¹⁵.

A town and surrounding municipalities merge to form a new town

In this constellation, a core town and its surrounding municipalities make use of the possibility of merging to establish a larger municipality. Since such mergers of municipalities are usually rejected politically in Schleswig-Holstein, the merger of the town of Burg auf Fehmarn with the other island municipalities can be seen as a special case. Prior to the reforms, the town of Burg auf Fehmarn had about 6,000 inhabitants, which meant that there was pressure to act. In the surrounding area there were three municipalities administered by the Fehmarn joint local district, which also did not have the number of inhabitants required by the state. On the island of Fehmarn, discussions led to a voluntary merger based on a contractual agreement between the town of Burg and the three other island municipalities¹⁶.

At the beginning of 2003, the new town of Fehmarn with 12,600 inhabitants, covering the entire island, was formed in the Ostholstein County. In terms of area, it is the second largest municipality in the state. All of the employees of the town of Burg, the joint local district and the three municipalities became employees of the town of Fehmarn. The results of the reform are not disputed today. The island's location and its identity-creating name "Fehmarn" may have contributed significantly to this consensus. However, the successful merger was not necessarily accepted as a role model by other areas, as critical comments by Hansen (2005) show. It is therefore particularly interesting that an analysis four years after the merger conducted by the town of Fehmarn itself showed significant savings, estimated by the town as an average of €250,000 per year. Moreover, "the majority of the population accepted the provision of only one administration for the whole island"¹⁷. At the end of his twelve-year term of office, the mayor

¹⁵ Interview with the mayor of the town of Husum on 14 February 2019.

¹⁶ Öffentlich-rechtlicher Vertrag zwischen der Stadt Burg auf Fehmarn, vertreten durch den Bürgermeister, der Gemeinde Bannesdorf auf Fehmarn, vertreten durch den Bürgermeister, der Gemeinde Landkirchen auf Fehmarn, vertreten durch den Bürgermeister und der Gemeinde Westfehmar, vertreten durch den Bürgermeister (contract to change districts' status) of 11 Oct. 2002.

¹⁷ Stadt Fehmarn, Aktueller Fusionsbericht zur Verwaltungsstrukturreform auf Fehmarn (Stand: April 2007).

of the merged town of Fehmarn also viewed the reforms positively, emphasising that it had been possible to reorganise the budget and reduce the number of employees from 103 to 80¹⁸.

A town and neighbouring municipalities establish institutional collaboration for the town's catchment area

The administrative reforms highlighted the special challenges of small towns with a small geographical area and many neighbouring municipalities. As has been shown, however, during the reform process such challenges were only dealt with as a secondary point or not at all. This made other types of cooperation necessary in such areas. The state planning authority had already taken up the topic of the problems in such areas in its 1998 spatial development plan (Die Ministerpräsidentin 1998, p. 32), and had recommended that 14 towns should cooperate with their nearby rural regions (catchment areas). The state planning authority also initiated and drew up spatial development plans for such catchment areas (cf. Kühn, Liebrecht 1999, Innenministerium 2004). If a cooperation of this type was implemented, agreements between towns and their adjacent areas were possible. Cities with limited spatial development possibilities could transfer settlement development contingents to municipalities in the region around them.

This impulse for cooperation has been taken up in quite different ways in the individual regions. In areas where the primary interest of the town in its neighbouring municipalities was financial, or where the municipalities did not recognise the importance of the nearby town in developing common living spaces, cooperative efforts failed very quickly. It is therefore all the more noteworthy that at least two lasting examples of urban–suburban cooperation in the areas around Rendsburg and Heide emerged from the reform processes in question (cf. Prieb 2019).

The impetus of the spatial planning authority had a direct effect in the economic area of Rendsburg (Rendsburg-Eckernförde County). In 2003 the town councils of Rendsburg and Büdelsdorf and eleven other neighbouring municipalities agreed on joint planning guidelines. This planning process developed into an intensive inter-communal cooperation, which was consolidated in 2012 with the formation of the “Development Agency for the Rendsburg Living and Economic Area”. In addition to certain concrete tasks, such as marketing and public relations for the economic area and the purchase and development of land, the agency manages a structural fund fed by the municipalities. Projects with regional significance and special benefits for the cooperation area are financed from this fund. The public legal form of cooperation was chosen, so that in the long term it would be possible for the agency to take over administrative tasks, especially joint town planning¹⁹.

¹⁸ “Ziele im Wesentlichen erreicht” in the online journal *fehmar 24* (www.fehmar24.de), 8 April 2015.

¹⁹ www.entwicklungsagentur-rendsbuerg.de; presentation “Interkommunale Zusammenarbeit als Instrument der Stadtentwicklungsplanung”, Frank Thomsen at the DASL-Arbeitstagung und Mitgliederversammlung, held in Hamburg on 15 Feb. 2019 (Folie 13).

Evaluation of the reform results with a focus on small cities

In conclusion, it can be said that the local government reforms in Schleswig-Holstein have not led to structural changes in local administrations, nor have they led to consistent results. Rather, a multitude of individual and sometimes confusing regulations have emerged.

Strengthening towns as central service locations was not part of the state's reform plans. Accordingly, the reforms have only led to sustainable strengthening of small towns if they took over the administration of a joint local district, either as a member or on its behalf. This has been problematic; in several cases, even if a centrally located town had an efficient administration, the surrounding municipalities were not prepared to entrust their administration to the town, but rather perpetuated duplicate structures with a local "collar" district administration. As mentioned above, small towns had a poor starting position in the negotiations with their neighbouring municipalities or surrounding joint local districts, since they usually had fewer inhabitants. Steps for developing better efficiency and specialisation of employees were thus rarely implemented. Structural interdependency and aspects of planning were also not taken into account sufficiently. It became clear that many small municipalities did not want to be administered by towns. As has been observed by the State Audit Office, small municipalities and most joint local districts preferred mergers with surrounding areas over mergers with a town administration. This goes hand in hand with rural municipalities strongly rejecting mergers with towns or with municipalities having a full-time administration. As an interim conclusion, it can be said that in the reform processes discussed here, the concerns of small towns were not sufficiently taken into account. In contrast, larger towns had a better starting position. In some cases they were able to take over or retain the administrative tasks of their surrounding rural areas.

It would be the task of more in-depth study to evaluate the constellations presented above in more detail, such as from the point of view of towns or of neighbouring villages. It would also be interesting to compare the two special cases, namely the solutions in Südtondern (integration of a town into a large joint local district) and in Fehmarn (integration of rural communities into a larger urban area).

The constellations described above have shown that to date, the reforms in question have shown little understanding of how urban administrative power can be used to strengthen towns as a means of strengthening regions. Nonetheless, it must be positively stated that a few attempts have been made in this direction. Indeed, there are several examples of towns in rural regions that have emerged strengthened from the reforms. This has been especially so for towns that are now running the administration of nearby joint local districts. These cases enable a better overall evaluation of these towns and their catchment areas. For example, the steps taken on the island of Fehmarn have made it possible to observe

the long-term consequences of various aspects of municipality mergers, such as administrative quality, the position of towns, or the interests of villages. And finally, the steps toward more collaboration in the region around the towns of Heide and Rendsburg, which still have considerable development potential, are quite encouraging.

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Małe miasta i ich otoczenie w kontekście reorganizacji samorządu terytorialnego. Doświadczenia Szlezwiku-Holsztynu (Niemcy)

Zarys treści: Znaczenie małych miast dla stabilizacji i wspierania rozwoju obszarów wiejskich jest stopniowo dostrzegane w badaniach i planowaniu przestrzennym. W artykule omówiono status małych miast w ramach lokalnych reform administracyjnych na przykładzie procesów przeprowadzonych w niemieckim kraju związkowym Szlezwik-Holsztyn. Pod koniec reformy małe miasta znalazły się w bardzo różnych układach politycznych i administracyjnych w stosunku do sąsiednich gmin. Wzmocnienie miast jako centrów usługowych nie było częścią planu reformy. W kilku przypadkach, nawet jeśli miasto miało sprawną administrację, okoliczne gminy nie były przygotowane na powierzenie jej własnych kompetencji, ale raczej utrwały zduplikowane lokalne struktury administracyjne w „pierścieniu” wokół miasta. Nie wdrożono działań na rzecz lepszej wydajności i specjalizacji pracowników. Stało się jasne, że wiele małych gmin nie chce być administrowanych przez miasta. W efekcie obawy małych miasteczek nie zostały w wystarczającym stopniu uwzględnione w przedstawianych procesach reformatorskich.

Słowa kluczowe: małe miasta, reorganizacja samorządu terytorialnego, regiony miejskie, współpraca miast z gminami sąsiednimi, łączenie gmin