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POLICIES AND URBAN PLANNING IN SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED TOWNS IN GERMANY AND FRANCE

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Abstract

Quite apart from the diversity of situations in small and medium-sized towns, stabilising their town centres is a major challenge. In both countries, town centres have been weakened by commercial changes, a decline in the supply of services and transformations in lifestyles. They are characterised by an increase in vacancy rates, which accelerates a spiralling loss of attractiveness and atmosphere of neglect. Since the beginning of the 2000s, this challenge has been central in the public debate. In both countries, urban renewal has been a key element of this revitalisation policy. However, although the context of public action is rather similar in France and Germany, the modes of governance differ. In France the administrative municipal system continues to provide a narrow and fixed framework despite recent territorial reforms that favour the intermunicipal level. In addition, cooperation, communication and participation of local actors from business and civil society are more firmly anchored in social and political practice in German small and medium-sized towns.

Keywords

Town-centre decline – urban renewal – public action – local governance – small and medium-sized towns

1 Introduction

Quite apart from the diversity of developments and situations in small and medium-sized towns (see Grabski-Kieron/Boutet 2022), stabilising their town centres and territorial expansion is a major challenge. In both countries, town centres have been weakened by commercial changes, a decline in the supply of services of general interest and transformations in lifestyles. They are characterised by an increase in vacancy rates, which accelerates a spiralling loss of attractiveness and atmosphere of neglect. In the course of 2010, this challenge was placed centre stage of the public debate and public-sector response. The aim was to strengthen the centrality of these towns using various drivers of urban development. In both countries, urban renewal was made a key element of this stabilisation and revitalisation policy. However, although the context of public action in small and medium-sized towns is similar in France and Germany, the modes of urban governance differ. In Germany, the organising of coordination between autonomous local actors is more strongly anchored in social and political practice. In contrast, in France the administrative municipal system continues to provide a narrow and fixed framework despite recent territorial reforms that favour the intermunicipal level.

2 The importance of small and medium-sized towns in policy development

2.1 The current situation – small and medium-sized towns as objects of research and public action

‘After two decades small towns have regained a role [in Germany], especially in the (political) debate [...]’ (Porsche/Milbert 2018: 5). This comment implies that small towns had long been ignored in Germany, as confirmed by a glance at the literature of recent years. Here statements suggest that small towns were a neglected topic not only in scientific circles but also in the public discussion (Herrenknecht/Wohlfahrt 2005: 5; see also Hannemann 2004: 53; Burdack 2013: 5; BBSR 2019b: 5; ARL 2019: 1). The focus of interest has rather been on metropolises and cities (Baumgart 2004: 7; Harfst/Wirth 2014: 464). However, urban renewal in small towns has received increased financial support since the mid-1980s (see Section 2.3).

In the mid-2010s, the German federation initiated two projects that encouraged the revival of research into small towns and that led to concrete policy recommendations. The research fields comprised, firstly, an evaluation of the situation of small towns in central locations and, secondly, an investigation of the potential of small towns in peripheral locations. The findings of both projects were discussed in June 2018 at a congress entitled *Kleinstädte in Deutschland* (Small Towns in Germany), where a federal government initiative with the same name was also presented. The initiative aims to strengthen smaller towns as places of residence and employment and to stimulate positive developments on the municipal level. The initiative bundles, coordinates and extends existing programmes and activities by the federal government that are intended to support the functions of small towns in both rural areas and in agglomerations. The 2018 coalition agreement of the federal government also in-

cluded the aim of further strengthening rural regions and future-proofing regions and urban areas (CDU/CSU/SPD 2018). The Urban Development Support Programme *Kleinere Städte und Gemeinden – überörtliche Zusammenarbeit und Netzwerke* (Small Towns and Municipalities – Supra-regional Cooperation and Networks) and the competition *Menschen und Erfolge* (People and Successes) are cornerstones of the small-town initiative. In addition, the establishment of a *Kleinstadtakademie* (Small Town Academy) will be piloted and a report on the current position of small towns in Germany produced (BBSR 2019c: 13 et seq.).

While several federal states such as Lower Saxony, Bavaria and Brandenburg promote small and medium-sized towns with their own competitions and programmes, such settlements have no particular role in the very well-financed rural development programmes, including EAFRD funding (European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development). Here, there is a clear divide between the portfolios for urban and spatial planning on the one hand and those for agriculture and rural development on the other.

The topic of small towns has also gained considerable popularity in research. For a long time, small towns were only reported upon as part of rural space or in combination with medium-sized towns – usually with a focus on deficits in connection to terms like shrinkage, peripheralisation and provinciality. Recently, three papers on small towns were published (ARL 2019; Steinführer/Porsche/Sondermann 2019; Porsche/Steinführer/Sondermann 2019) with the aim of encouraging a reorientation of research. The papers identified research needs in particular fields, discussed methodological issues and data, and made recommendations for research and teaching. Furthermore, at the end of 2019 the *HochschulCampus KleinstadtForschung* (HCKF – University Campus Small Town Research) was initiated with the intention of tackling the topic in a systematic and interdisciplinary fashion for the first time in Germany. The project is led by the Brandenburg Technical University Cottbus-Senftenberg and is funded by the German federation for a three-year period (2019-2022).

In France, research on small and medium-sized towns has a long history (Edouard 2012). As in Germany, in the 2000s such settlements were over-shadowed and relegated to a marginal position in scientific debate and research by the focus of many investigations on metropolisation (Carrier/Demazière 2012; Berroir/Fol/Quéva et al. 2019). The revival of interest in medium-sized towns was especially notable in France in the decade from 2010 to 2020, as seen in numerous academic and specialist articles (Bekkouche 2011). Small towns, however, remained a poor relation of urban planning for a long time (Edouard 2012). Recently though, they have attracted more interest. Action research programmes have also emerged, such as the 2018 *Recherche dans et pour les petites villes* (Research in and for Small Towns) of the *Plateforme d'observation des projets et stratégies urbaines* (POPSU – Platform of Observation of Urban Projects and Strategies).

In France, two periods were conducive to the conception and implementation of policies particularly focused on small and medium-sized towns. From 1973 to 1982, the finance of infrastructure and urban development measures was ensured by a contract-based policy for medium-sized towns that involved the central state and



Figure 1: Towns and municipalities in the programme Action cœur de ville (Heart of Town – City Centre Action Programme) / Source: Ministère de la Cohésion des territoires et des relations avec les collectivités territoriales 2018: 2

territorial authorities. The analysis of local requirements was relevant here. Medium-sized towns played a pioneering role in testing cooperative contract-based approaches, which broke with the previous top-down, standardised planning methods. In the following three decades, medium-sized towns were not subject to any specific planning or development policy but were variously – both negatively and positively – impacted by a range of sectoral policies (see Adam/Baudelle/Dumont 2022: XX). The *contrats ruraux* (rural contracts) introduced in 1975 were a move in the same direction and supported small towns in their local development. This policy was extended and transferred to the *régions* in the 1990s, but it was part of rural development and not a policy explicitly for small towns. Indeed, for a long time small towns appeared rather part of the rural area than fully fledged urban centres (Santamaria 2016: 142).

Although the *Délégation interministérielle à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'attractivité régionale* (DATAR – Interministerial Delegation for Spatial Planning and Regional Attractiveness) initiated the pilot project *20 villes moyennes* (20 medium-sized towns) in 2007, it was only later that attention began to be paid to the particularities of the challenges facing small and medium-sized towns in connection with devitalisation. In 2014 DATAR issued a call for expressions of interest in the small town (*AMI Centres-bourgs*). This led to the programme *Petites villes de demain* (Small Towns of Tomorrow), which was launched in 2020 and had much in common with the *Kleinstädte in Deutschland* initiative. For medium-sized towns DATAR introduced the *Action cœur de ville* (Heart of Town – City Centre Action, 2018-2022; see Figure 1), which aimed to coordinate resources and promote the revitalisation of the centres (see Adam/Baudelle/Dumont 2022: XX).

In the course of the 2010s, questions concerning the future of small and medium-sized towns were addressed in debates on urban research and planning policy in both countries and it became increasingly common to consider small towns as independent urban centres.

2.2 Deployment of funding with a spatial impact

Public funding from the various sectoral policies and their promotion programmes is essential for dealing with the current challenges. A framework for the targeted and efficient deployment of this funding is provided by the Leipzig Charter for Sustainable European Cities, which provides guiding principles for integrated, cooperative urban development policy (Gatzweiler 2012: 94).

A diverse mix of promotion measures are available that involve small and medium-sized towns in different ways. The key elements in Germany are:

- > Urban Development Support (see Section 2.3),
- > *Gemeinschaftsaufgabe Verbesserung der regionalen Wirtschaftsstruktur* (Joint federation/federal state Task for the Improvement of Regional Economic Structures),

- > Large-scale transport investments,
- > Labour market support and social transfers,
- > The promotion of integrated rural development in the framework of the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Towns and cities with research institutions and universities also participate in programmes in the fields of research and education (Gatzweiler 2012: 95; BBSR 2014: 4).

Knowledge about the regional distribution of public finance is still very incomplete. Evaluations only consider levels down to that of the districts. The same is true for the determinants of regional distribution and the significance of the funding for regional economic development. Creating an intersectoral and efficient funding policy is thus difficult (Plankl 2013: 2). Investigations show that there are distinct regional differences in the intensity of funding and the relative importance of the individual fields of funding and also of other hard and soft locational factors (ibid.). Regional incidence analyses by the *Bundesinstitut für Bau-, Stadt- und Raumforschung* (BBSR – Federal Institute for Research on Building, Urban Affairs and Spatial Development) have shown that at times primarily shrinking regions and thus also small and medium-sized towns in these areas participate to an above-average extent in measures of equalisation policy – measured according to the proportion of their inhabitants in the total population of Germany (Gatzweiler 2012: 95). This especially concerns the funding that is, in the broadest sense, intended to create equivalent living conditions in all sub-areas, especially the single farm payments and infrastructure subsidies made in the context of the *Gemeinschaftsaufgabe Verbesserung der regionalen Wirtschaftsstruktur* and funding from the Common Agricultural Policy and Urban Development Support.

In France, a general distinction is made between spatial policies and sectoral or social policies with spatial impacts. The former provide funding in the framework of regional policies (contracts between the central state and *régions*, regional plans, investments in the future), the *Politique de la ville*¹ (Town Policy) and rural development policies. Evaluations are fragmentary. There are no broadly based investigations that make it possible to judge the position of small and medium-sized towns in this spatial policy. Nonetheless, small and medium-sized towns in both countries profit greatly from urban planning and renewal. They are thus in no way neglected by the higher levels (Delpirou 2019a).

Sectoral policies, on the other hand, have ambivalent and very varied impacts over time, depending on the national political priorities and the efficiency of the lobbies that represent the small and medium-sized towns. In the 1990s, for instance, the *Plan Universités 2000* made possible the establishment of higher education in medium-sized towns (Santamaria 2012). Around the turn of the millennium, support for industrial districts, enterprise clusters and rural centres of competence was directed

1 The aim of the *Politique de la ville* is to strengthen social cohesion through the spatial integration of socially disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods.

towards small and medium-sized towns (Edouard 2012). However, since the mid-2000s, the implementation of the Lisbon strategy in the fields of higher education and promotion of innovation has led to the massive funding of large cities and metropolises (Fol 2020). Furthermore, in the 2000s and 2010s, small and medium-sized towns suffered from the effects of state reforms in various sectors (health, justice, security) and from the closure of facilities due to rationalisation and austerity drives (Taulelle 2012). These reforms have greatly impacted the development of small towns, both in terms of the loss of functions and employment (Baudet-Michel/Conti/Chouraqui et al. 2019) and in terms of the potential for re-using wasteland (Lotz-Coll 2019). This reveals the lack of coordination between sectoral policies and the absence of a coherent and integrated strategic vision for spatial planning and development in France.

Social policies do not target specific regions or sectors but rather organise social transfers. Davezies (2008) underlined the spatial redistribution effects of social policies (pensions, unemployment allowances, social benefits, etc.) and the role of small and medium-sized towns in the redistribution mechanisms. More competitive areas, primarily large cities and metropolises, produce wealth which is distributed throughout the country and especially benefits the small and medium-sized towns. Public services and services of general interest are overrepresented in such settlements (Davezies/Talandier 2014), which makes them more susceptible to the closure of public facilities.

2.3 The importance of urban renewal for small and medium-sized towns

In France, the comprehensive redevelopment approach of the 1950s and 1960s gave way to less radical urban renewal in the 1970s. The urban contracts, which were introduced in the course of the *Politique des villes moyennes* (Medium-sized Towns Policy) of the 1970s, were an opportunity to bundle diverse planning instruments. The focus was on the improvement and development of living environments (Santamaria 2012; Vadelorge 2013). Since this time, urban renewal has been supported by an enormous arsenal of laws, procedures and financial instruments that make it possible to protect urban heritage, renew urban structures, develop public spaces, combat high vacancy rates, create new facilities and improve the integration of socially deprived neighbourhoods. The extent to which these instruments are actually employed varies and depends on the abilities of the local actors utilising them (see Section 1).

The *Opération programmée d'amélioration de l'habitat* (OPAH – Programmes for the Improvement of Living Conditions) introduced in 1977, legally anchored in 1991 in the *loi d'orientation pour la ville* (LOV – Urban Policy Law), were and are very successful in French towns (Badariotti 2006: 10). They are, however, very limited in their spatial extent. The *loi solidarité et renouvellement urbain* (SRU – Law on Urban Solidarity and Renewal), passed in 2000, provides a broader foundation for urban renewal in relation to spatial extent and fields of engagement (urban planning, social development, mobility).

The enthusiasm of the small and medium-sized towns for the *Programmes d'amélioration du cadre de vie* (Programmes for the Improvement of Living Conditions) of the *Agence nationale de l'habitat* (ANAH – National Housing Agency) and the *Programmes de rénovation urbaine* (Urban Renewal Programmes) of the *Agence nationale pour la rénovation urbaine* (ANRU – National Urban Renewal Agency) reveals their strong dependency on national directives and finance (Gaudin 2018). The massive demolition of housing from the 1950s, 60s and 70s located on the edge of the urban settlements and the renewal of housing in the historic centres indicates the power of cultural heritage references in small towns (Périsse 2006) but also the ideological orientation of the state renewal agency ANRU. French small and medium-sized towns clearly have a set of options for organising and financing urban development and renewal projects. The current devitalisation of centres suggests, however, that there has been either insufficient mobilisation of these instruments or a lack of coherence and global strategy. In the second half of the 2010s, state action therefore focused on implementing integrated mechanisms targeting the revitalisation of town centres suffering from high vacancy rates in both housing and commercial premises (e.g. through programmes such as the call for expressions of interest in small towns in 2014, extended and elaborated in 2020 with the *Petites villes de demain* (Small Towns of Tomorrow) and the City Centre Action Programme (initiated in 2018). These programmes aim to effectively provide funding for local authorities, primarily for the development of capacities in project management. They also offer an important framework for local integrated approaches with workshops, exchanges and networking between local actors, for instance through the Heart of Town – City Centre Action activities (Buch/Griffoul/Ravel 2020). The programmes have put small and medium-sized towns back on the policy agenda and strengthened their centrality, but they do not make it sufficiently possible to tackle multi-scale challenges. Furthermore, they ignore the strategic and regulatory dimensions of urban development concepts and projects (Delpirou 2019b), for example, problems linked to mobility and accessibility remain unaddressed despite the challenges presented by urban sprawl.

In contrast, urban renewal in Germany is successfully pursued as Urban Development Support^{2,3}, which since the 1990s has been divided into a number of sub-programmes. It has diverse economic, social, ecological and urban design effects (BMVBS 2011), encourages other public and private investments (see, e.g., DIW 2004) and has an impact on all urban development. It offers an important organisational frame for bundling resources and local integrated approaches for inner urban development (Schmitt/Schröteler-von Brandt 2016: 12 et seq.).

As early as the 1960s, the German federation and federal states financed the first investigations and pilot projects in the field of Urban Development Support (see Figure 3). This also involved small and medium-sized towns (BMBau 1978; 1983). The passing of the *Städtebauförderungsgesetz* (StBauFG – Urban Renewal and Development Act) in 1971 provided a uniform legal framework for the promotion and

2 Also see www.staedtebaufoerderung.info (09 December 2021).

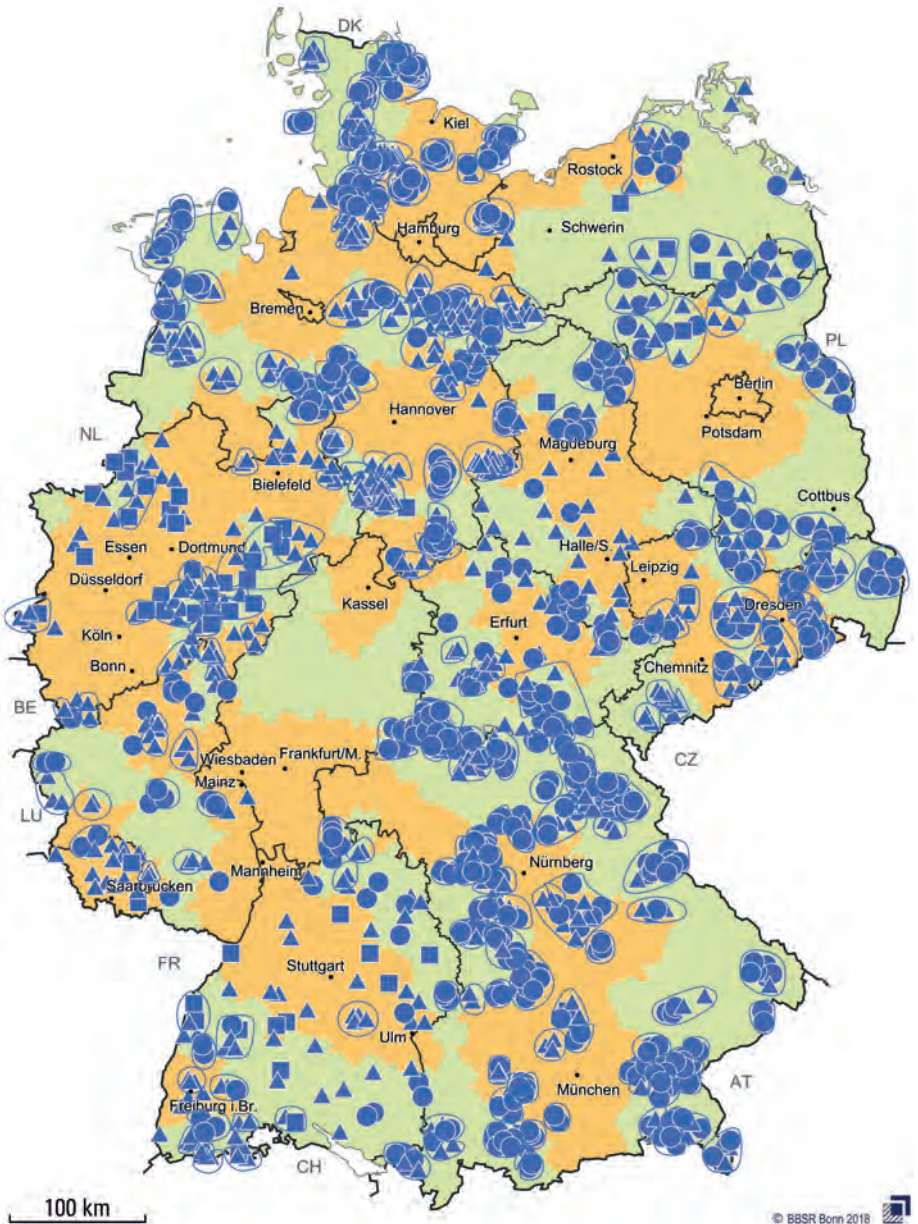
3 Urban renewal, urban regeneration and urban redevelopment are used as synonymous terms in the following discussion. Urban Development Support refers to the programmatic measures.

execution of urban development. The focus was initially on comprehensive redevelopment, but in the 1970s the aims of urban renewal changed – as in France – to focus rather on cautious, conservationist regeneration with the participation of those affected. Constructional failings and functional defects such as deficient built fabric, poor housing conditions, vacancies and unfavourable transport conditions were to be permanently rectified. Socially disadvantaged areas were also to receive support. In order to achieve these aims, the towns were provided with a bundle of legal, procedural and financial instruments. Urban renewal was undertaken as a comprehensive project in legally designated renewal areas and was financed through the Urban Development Support Programmes of the federation and federal states (BMI 2020).

Until the mid-1980s, smaller towns were underrepresented in the programmes of urban redevelopment. This changed from 1985 when programmatic funding from the German federation was increased to almost one billion German Marks. Small towns with under 10,000 inhabitants profited immensely here. Their share rose from 19% to 29% in the 1988 programme year (BMBau 1990: 13).

In the 1990s, urban renewal contributed largely to the preservation of the historic structure of urban built form, particularly in eastern Germany. After reunification, the town centres of medium-sized towns in rural regions profited over-proportionally, judged in terms of population. This is also true, if somewhat less so, of small towns (Karsten/Hesse 2011: 35; BMVBS 2011: 8). Nonetheless, the massive demographic changes and the concentration of retail in other locations have often made it impossible to fill the built shells of historic old towns with urban life.

In 2010 the German federation and federal states issued an Urban Development Support Programme specifically for small towns. The objective of the programme *Kleinere Städte und Gemeinden – überörtliche Zusammenarbeit und Netzwerke* (Smaller Towns and Municipalities – Regional cooperation and Networks (see Figure 2) was to strengthen the small and medium-sized towns as anchors in rural regions. Neighbouring towns and municipalities were to create intermunicipal alliances and develop a joint integrated development concept. Finance was prioritised for measures targeting the adaptation, safeguarding and development of municipal services and supplies such as social infrastructure or the accessible design of public space, and especially for the strengthening and renewal of urban centres. Up to and including 2018, the federation provided circa 498 million euros for over 600 comprehensive projects in more than 1,400 municipalities (BBSR 2019a: 6), many of which were characterised by a declining population (47%), were located in sparsely populated regions (48%) and had less than 10,000 inhabitants (85%). Only 4% had over 20,000 residents (BBSR 2019a: 17 et seq.).



Stadt-/Gemeindetyp

- Mittelstadt
- ▲ Kleinstadt
- Landgemeinde
- interkommunale Maßnahme
- Großstadtreionen
- Gebiete außerhalb von Großstadtreionen

Figure 2: Towns and municipalities in the programme Kleinere Städte und Gemeinden – überörtliche Zusammenarbeit und Netzwerke (as of 2017) / Source: BBSR 2019a: 19

Translation of captions:

Types of town/municipality

Medium-sized town

Small town

Rural municipality

Intermunicipal alliance

City regions

Areas outside city regions

A national transfer agency supported the towns in the programme with knowledge transfer, regular exchanges of experience and regular statutory reports. Despite the success and the high level of acceptance, there was always also a certain amount of scepticism and criticism of the focus on services of general interest and intermunicipal cooperation. The instruments of Urban Development Support targeted redevelopment areas, which did not seem to fit with regional, intermunicipal cooperation. With the reorientation of Urban Development Support in 2020, the programme was discontinued. Instead, measures to secure services of general interest and intermunicipal cooperation were then included in three new programmes⁴ (see Figure 3). The funding rate for intermunicipal cooperation was reduced. The programmes use targeted funding in an effort to provide structurally weak regions with the possibility of meeting the needs of both larger urban centres and small and medium-sized towns.

Urban renewal in Germany is financed via a uniform programme that allows the municipalities a great deal of flexibility. However, in France, despite approaches focusing on political decentralisation and cooperation, towns remain very dependent on the national agencies, both conceptually and in terms of funding (Epstein 2015; see Figure 4).

4 Lebendige Zentren – Erhalt und Entwicklung der Orts- und Stadtkerne (Living Town Centres – the conservation and development of district and town centres), Sozialer Zusammenhalt – Zusammenleben im Quartier gemeinsam gestalten (Social Cohesion – jointly designing community life in the neighbourhood), and Wachstum und nachhaltige Erneuerung – Lebenswerte Quartiere gestalten (Growth and Sustainable Regeneration – designing liveable neighbourhoods).

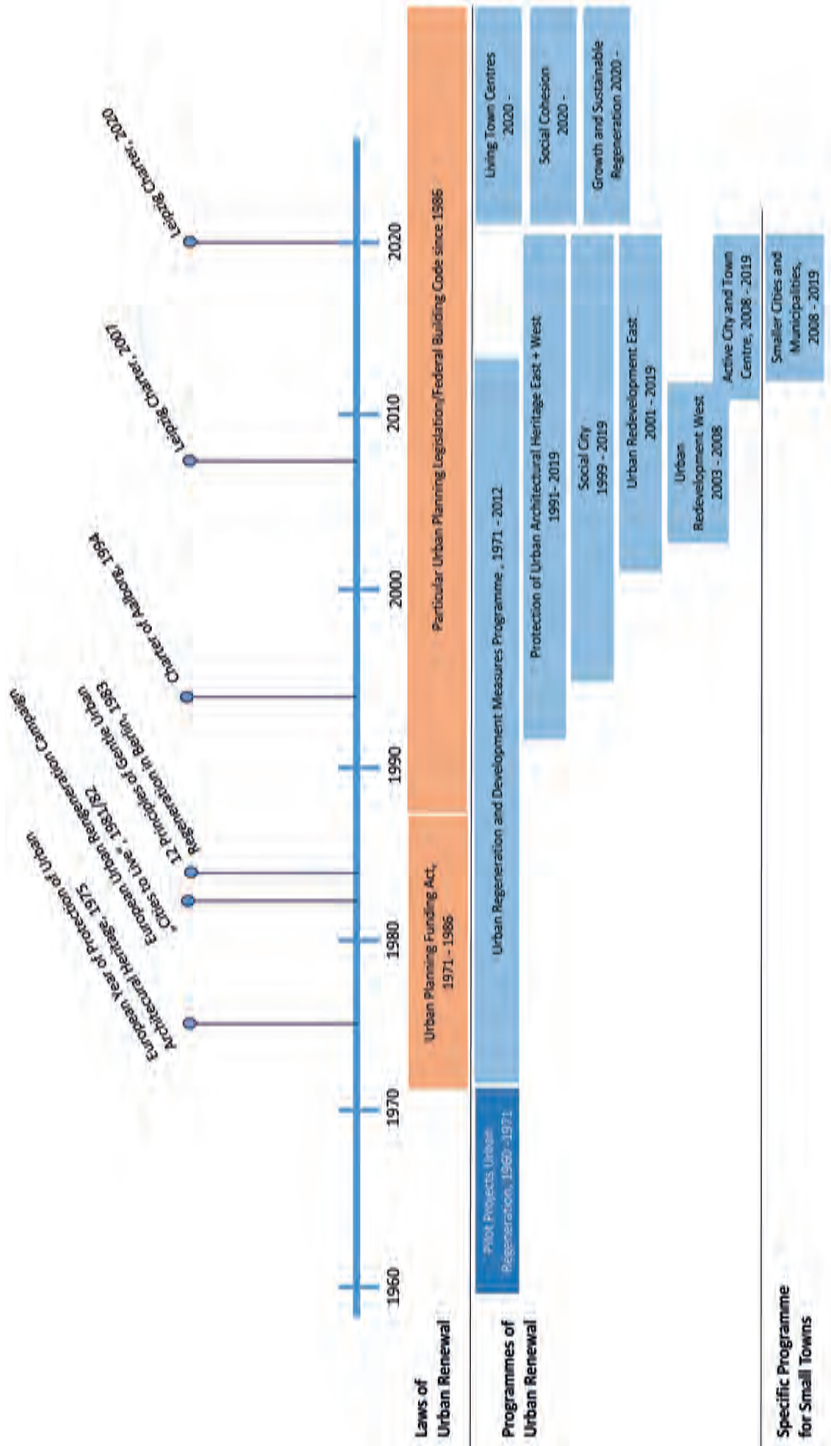


Figure 3: Timeline urban renewal in Germany /Source: authors

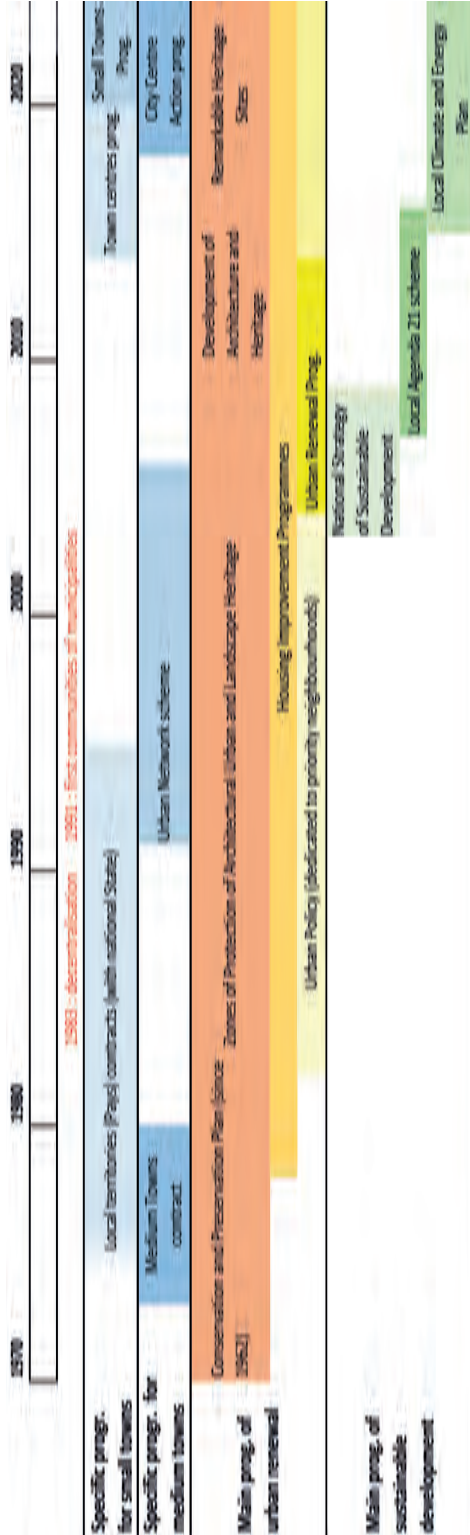


Figure 4: Timeline of main national development and urban renewal policies in France /Source: authors

3 Public policies and governance in small and medium-sized towns

3.1 Particularities of governance and policy in small and medium-sized towns

The complex and multi-layered challenges facing small and medium-sized towns are tackled in a specific governance setting, which in both Germany and France is particularly characterised by (Baumgart et al. 2004: 7 et seq.; Rüdiger 2004: 45 et seq.; BBSR 2015: 12):

- > The dominance of daily tasks and, consequently, the insufficient development or total absence of medium and long-term guidelines.
- > A shortage of personnel and the frequent staffing of the urban administration with allrounders who need to take on responsibility for various fields of work and tasks. This means that the way in which specialist policy issues are tackled depends very much on the understanding and availability of specialist (administrative) personnel. It also results in responsibility for urban development tasks resting on only a few or, indeed, one pair of shoulders. There is thus, for example, insufficient capacity available for managing processes, applying for funding (see below), or carrying out participation procedures. Especially with regards to EU funding strategies, local politicians in small and medium-sized municipalities in Germany and France complain that they are de facto unable to participate. They are part of the target group but their ability to satisfy the demands of applications is limited due to the complexity of the necessary processes, the bureaucratic steps required for the necessary processes or procedures, the personnel resources, the financial margins, the technical equipment and the specialist know-how (Rüdiger 2004: 42).
- > The dominance of a technocratic understanding of planning in relation to managing development processes. This results in planning procedures being conducted either as formal routines or extremely informally.
- > The focus of municipal policy decisions tends to be on periodic success as dictated by legislative periods rather than on long-term goals and new scientific findings. The scope and limits of municipal policy are hereby found in the field of tension between regional and local state bodies, local industry and inhabitants.
- > The particular importance of influential individuals (key figures with integrative power e.g. mayors or committed individuals from urban marketing or local business) and of so-called pre-decision makers, especially from the urban administrations.

In general, research by Rüdiger (2004) shows that in Germany these specific governance qualities increase as the size of the town declines. It can be supposed that this is similarly true for France.

A further significant parameter of municipal ability to manage development is sufficient funding. In France, the *Association des petites villes de France* (APVF – Association of Small Towns of France) and the *Banque postale* emphasise the great dependence of small towns on national and local solidarity, as 74% of small towns have no or little flexibility with taxation (APVF - La Banque postale 2019). Model calculations for Germany suggest that due to the demographic situation, public budgets are likely to come increasingly under pressure and therefore the financial position of all municipalities will clearly deteriorate in the medium term (Gatzweiler 2012: 89). No specific trend for small and medium-sized towns can be identified as there are no significant correlations between population and per-capita debt levels or short-term public borrowing to finance routine expenditures (Kaschlik 2012: 15). Local stakeholders also regret that the frameworks and measures of European operational programmes are not always aligned with local territorial issues (Demazière 2014: 138).

3.2 Governance for and in small and medium-sized towns

In light of the limited resources and traditional control and planning models, increasing attention has turned to notions of governance for the development of small and medium-sized towns. Governance can, on the one hand, refer to coordination and cooperation between public actors (multi-level governance and intermunicipal cooperation) (Lang 2007: 3). On the other hand, it can be understood to refer to the social self-organisation of an urban centre involving the interaction of networks and stakeholders from civil society, business, politics and the administration (Urban Governance) (Fürst 2007: 6).

From the perspective of German small and medium-sized towns, three weaknesses can be identified in the political multi-level system (Dehne 2019b: 40):

- 1 The lack of a temporal fit and content alignment between programmes and funding on the one hand and local topics and challenges on the other;
- 2 The failure to strike a balance between state provisions, incentives and support, and local flexibility to enable independent development (Kühn 2013);
- 3 The deficiency of communication between the political and administrative levels (Bojarra-Becker/Franke/zur Nedden 2017).

For many years, German small towns have lacked their own political lobby to introduce their interests into policymaking at the levels of the federal states and the federation. This may change with the increased interest of politics and business in the concerns of small and medium-sized towns. In France, where the holding of dual or multiple mandates was common until 2017, communication between the political levels seems to be simpler and more established, if not necessarily more effective. The political (over-)representation of small and medium-sized towns on the regional (regional councils) and national (senate, national assembly) levels means that such settlements are well-integrated in public activities. Since the end of the 1980s, two associations of mayors have carried out a great deal of lobbying on national level: the *Association*

villes de France (towns with between 10,000 and 100,000 inhabitants) and the *Association des petites villes de France* (towns with between 2,500 and 25,000 inhabitants).

In contrast, intermunicipal cooperation is more difficult to achieve in France than in Germany, although clear progress has been made in recent years. Cooperation is less common between small and medium-sized towns but occurs rather between such settlements and small, neighbouring local authorities. In reaction to suburbanisation processes, in France a series of reforms of the intermunicipal administration (1995, 1999, 2016) have strengthened small and medium-sized towns as central to spatial cooperation and the execution of projects and as coordinators of spatial planning (*régions, pays, Schéma de cohérence territoriale* [SCoT - Scheme for Territorial Coherence], *Plan local d'urbanisme intercommunal* [PLUi - Local Plan for Intermunicipal Urbanism], etc.) (Taulelle 2010). It remains the case that the municipalities on the edges of urban agglomerations continue to have considerable political influence locally due to a lack of reform of municipal structures, in contrast to the situation in Germany where incorporations have been carried out. The development of a governance system for small and medium-sized towns therefore sometimes meets with considerable local resistance from the periphery (see the case study of Thiers in Section 4.2). Similarly, the division of responsibilities between municipalities and intermunicipal bodies, for example in the field of urban planning and housing development, can be a significant factor in implementation difficulties (Driant 2009: 90). For instance, in the Heart of Town – City Centre Action programme, the mayor of the town centre (rather than the president of the intermunicipal body) has the privilege of leading activities even though the consequences of the issues concerned extend far beyond the territory of the municipality. It thus seems that this programme *'confonde l'espace du problème (le coeur de ville) du problème avec celui de sa solution (l'agglomération et ses franges)'* ('confuses the space of the problem (the urban core) with that of its solution (the urban agglomeration and its fringes)') (Delpirou 2019a: 6).

In Germany, intermunicipal cooperation between small and medium-sized towns has something of a tradition. Since the end of the 1990s, pilot projects and funding programmes have promoted and initiated such cooperation in various fields. In addition to the programme mentioned in Section 2.3, particular success was seen in federal states like Hesse with the programme *Stadtumbau West* (Urban Redevelopment West) and in Bavaria with its support programme of intermunicipal agreements. This can involve, for instance, joint initiatives to combat high vacancy rates or intermunicipal agreements to avoid the designation of new building land. Nonetheless cooperation remains difficult in some cases.

Urban development in the sense of urban governance no longer progresses through classical management and control models implemented by policy and the administration. It rather results from the exercising of influence, and the decisions and actions of many stakeholders, networks and institutions in the urban centres. Urban development involves *'zwischen und mit verschiedenen Akteuren gemeinsame Angelegenheiten zu regeln'* ('settling matters of common interest between and with different actors') (Selle 2017: 23). Communication and cooperation play a central role,

as do impulses and facilitation provided by policy and the administration. From this point of view, planning authorities find themselves transformed into something more akin to a facilitating administration. The planning and the development of small towns becomes a locally based (Burdack 2013) or cooperative matter (Dehne 2019a). These forms of governance are increasingly significant in practice in small and medium-sized towns and trickle down to influence understandings of planning and control among politicians and administrators.

This trend has also been observed in France since the 1980s (political decentralisation, see Paris/Gustedt 2022), especially in light of cooperation between the political-administrative and business stakeholders (Tallec 2012). Participatory approaches are more recent but are now common practice in the implementation of local projects and programmes. In small towns they are used in a less institutionalised, less systematic and more informal fashion than in cities (Mainet 2016), but they are nonetheless integrated in local management, although the extent of integration varies with local requirements and power constellations (Anquetin/Cuny 2016). In comparison to Germany, the focus is on consultation and joint decision making rather than on mobilisation and active participation in the implementation of projects.

In this context, Kühn distinguishes between two basic types of governance forms: governance by government as classical planning policy led by the mayor and administration; and governance with government, whereby government is extended by informal actor networks. New scope for action can only develop through a combination of internal actor networks and external networks on the supra-local political level (Kühn/Weck 2012). In small and medium-sized towns, however, problems and barriers arise concerning the strategic ability of public actors (see Section 3.1) (Kühn 2013).

4 Case studies

4.1 The model project *Potenziale von Kleinstädten in peripheren Lagen* (Potentials of Small Towns in Peripheral Locations)⁵

In order to tackle the lack of attention that has been paid to the subject and to explore the opportunities and limits of urban governance in small towns, in 2015 the German federation launched the research field *Potenziale von Kleinstädten in peripheren Lagen*. By 2018 cooperative forms of planning and development, like scenario processes, youth barcamps and additional participative formats had been tested in eight small towns⁶. The scenario processes in particular were intended to create a pioneering spirit, develop shared visions and generate joint action for future-proof urban development. The eight model towns viewed themselves as a learning network

5 A slightly shortened version of the concluding section of Dehne, P. (2019): *Kooperative Kleinstadtentwicklung*. In: *Kleinstädte. Chancen, Dynamiken, Potenziale. Informationen zur Raumentwicklung*, Heft 6/2018: 86-1010.

6 Bad Lobenstein (Thuringia), Beverungen (North Rhine-Westphalia), Großschönau (Saxony), Kastellaun (Rhineland Palatinate), Malente (Schleswig-Holstein), Mücheln (Saxony-Anhalt), Rodewisch (Saxony) and Zell am Harmersbach (Baden-Württemberg).

and kept up a lively exchange with one another throughout the lifetime of the project (BBSR 2016).

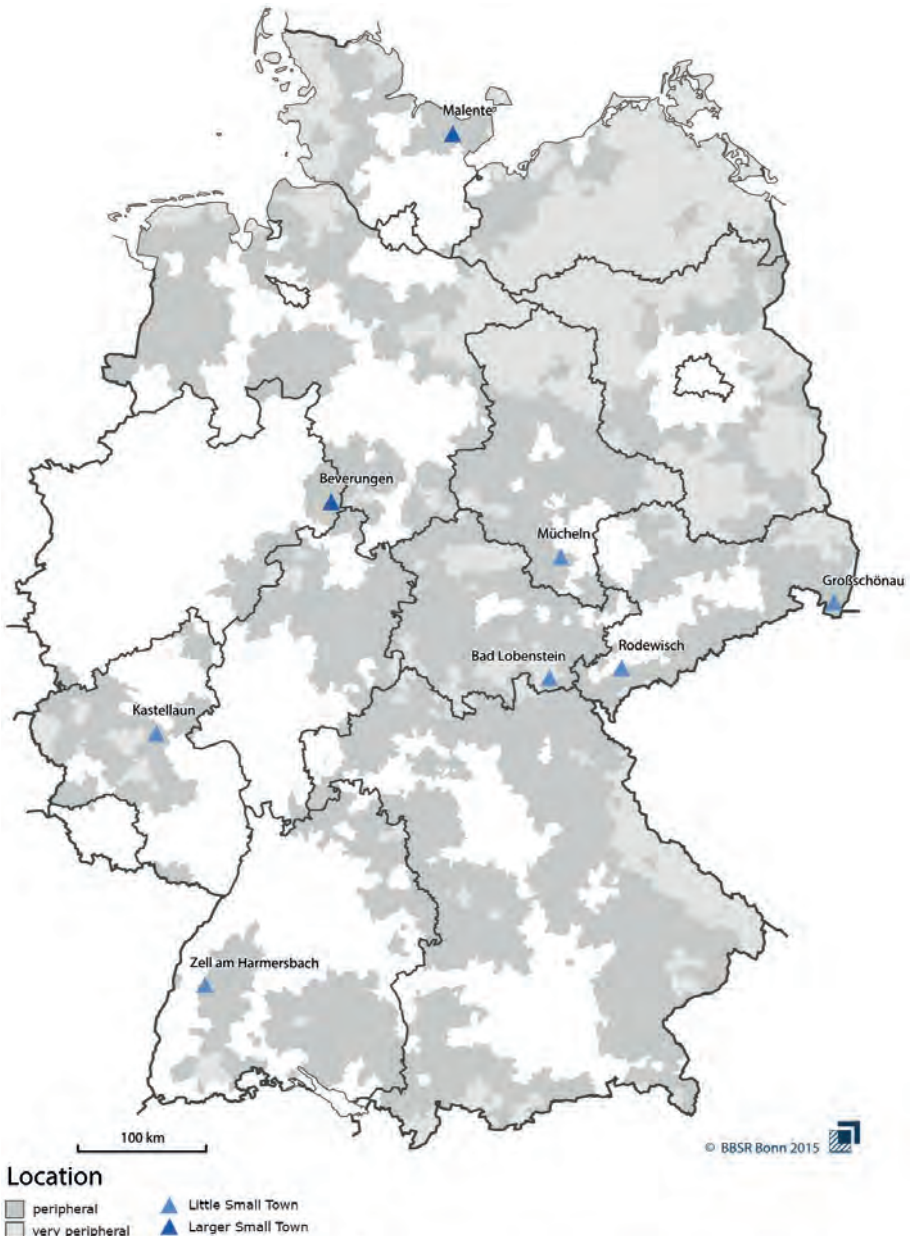


Figure 5: Location of the model project *Potenziale von Kleinstädten in peripheren Lagen (Potentials of Small Towns in Peripheral Locations)* / Source: BBSR 2019d: 12

The backbone of the processes in the small towns were five one- or two-day scenario workshops. In structured and moderated discussion processes during the workshops, between 15 and 35 local actors developed visions of the future for their small town. The participants reflected a cross-section of the society of the small town and acted as multipliers. Overall, 174 people took part in the scenario processes in the eight model projects. A third were from politics and administration, a third came from civil society and a third represented organisations, associations, institutions or businesses. The development of scenarios is intended to encourage empowerment and participation and thus serves an explicitly communicative purpose in the cooperative process. The scenario process was thus deliberately designed not as a strategic, explorative expert process but as an open, playful discussion space. This was therefore an opportunity to work with normative and narrative scenarios (BBSR 2016; Dehne/Hoffmann 2020).

The results of the scenario processes show how the participants imagined the future of 'their' small town. The visions and potentials identified thus emerge from the small town's individual opportunities, consider general developments and influencing factors, and can be transferred to other small towns. Much of what the stories tell was not necessarily new, such as the railway station being a centre of mobility and communication or a coworking and workation retreat. However, the ideas gained great new impetus through being generated in the scenario workshops. The significance of cooperation is also exciting. When implementation was discussed, cooperation was almost always important to the participants: internally, for instance in the form of business networks, retail initiatives or association cooperatives, and externally in the form of intermunicipal cooperation (Dehne/Hoffmann 2020).

Overall, the model projects revealed that it is possible to trigger governance structures in small towns with external stimuli. Normative, narrative scenario processes can provide impetus and act as catalysts for a cooperative urban development process. They can promote a new form and culture of planning: participative, strategically focused and with a holistic orientation. In a short time, it was possible to create a broad, consensual understanding of parameters, influencing factors, potentials, the future and projects, one with which almost all participants identified. Joint projects were also initiated (Dehne/Hoffmann 2020).

On the other hand, the scenario processes revealed four typical fields of tension relevant to cooperative development and planning processes: 1) a tendency towards the exclusion of certain social groups and an inability to 'reach' them, 2) the significance of attitudes, convictions and strong promoters, 3) competition from analytical urban planning, and 4) the issue of democratic legitimacy and relationships to the municipal parliament. All four fields of tension show how cooperative urban development must be sensitively balanced between planning and policy styles, especially in small towns. It is not the right path in every case and for every topic (Dehne/Hoffmann 2020).

Some of the towns named here have made communication and cooperation a principle of their activities beyond the lifetime of the scenario process. Others closed the window of opportunity at the end of the scenario workshop and continued with

planning and policy led by the mayor and administration, in some cases because there was a lack of resonance in the population, in other cases because the traditional methods of policy design function well. A third group have taken a third path of 'cautious participation' whereby governance forms are differentiated according to the intensity of participation and links to government.

4.2 Two small towns in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes *région*: Thiers and Crémieu

Thiers and Crémieu are two quite normal towns, even if they cannot be said to be representative for all small French towns. Applying a logic of '*bricolage territorial*' ('territorial do-it-yourself') (Béhar 2011), they are attempting to meet the challenges posed by rundown centres, social developments and the structural transformation of various urban neighbourhoods. Crémieu anticipates development pressure from the metropolis of Lyon, while Thiers struggles with a declining population and the consequences thereof, despite its proximity to Clermont-Ferrand. Like other French towns, they have made the upgrading of urban cultural heritage an important element of their urban development policy. They thereby pursue a more or less successful logic of territorial attractiveness.

For many years, public activities in the field of urban development were a municipal responsibility. The most recent processes of intermunicipal cooperation were imposed upon the towns. The stability of the municipal council in Crémieu has enabled a coherent long-term strategy to be implemented. In contrast, regular changes of leadership in Thiers have been unfavourable for the continuity and coherence of public activities, especially in light of the town's structural problems. In both towns the mobilisation and implementation of numerous national and regional instruments demonstrate that relationships to other administrative levels function smoothly. However, Thiers pursues an opportunist strategy, while Crémieu works towards a long-term, strategic objective. In both towns, local business actors have long been involved in drawing up development and planning strategies. Participatory approaches are nonetheless tentative unless they are obligatory parts of development or urban renewal procedures.

Thiers: a small industrial town searching for economic and demographic renewal

Thiers is a small town in the Auvergne, situated in a low mountain range about 100 km west of Lyon and 30 km east of Clermont-Ferrand, with an *aire urbaine* (urban area) containing 18,000 inhabitants. The traditionally industrial town specialises in cutlery, metallics and plastics and has been facing the consequences of a declining population since 1980 (18,036 inhabitants in 1968 compared to 13,904 inhabitants in 2018, with a slight improvement visible since 2013) (Insee 2021). This decline especially affects the rundown historic centre, which is located on high ground and is characterised by a socially disadvantaged population. The lower part of the town has profited from the development of industrial areas and housing estates.

Since the end of the 1970s, Thiers has worked tirelessly to combat its demographic and socioeconomic weaknesses and urban decline by mobilising various national and regional measures and programmes: a *Zone de protection du patrimoine architectural, urbain et paysager* (ZPPAUP – Conservation Zone for Architectural, Urban and Landscape Heritage), a state-town contract, cluster promotion, an Urban Renewal Programme, a Heart of Town – City Centre Action programme etc. Although these activities affect various fields (urban planning, cultural heritage, the economy, social and cultural development, etc.), the development of an effective integrated strategy is proving extremely difficult. Competition with neighbouring municipalities is fierce and intermunicipal cooperation is dysfunctional. Until 2017 the commercial districts were under municipal administration, which led to spatially dispersed structures and prevented an effective re-concentration of facilities such as retail areas.

In 2017 the founding of the *Communauté de communes* (Urban community for rural areas) ‘Thiers Dore et Montagne’ was prescribed by the central state. The community of municipalities comprises 30 municipalities and 40,000 inhabitants. It has jurisdiction over important fields (in particular housing development, urban planning and economic development). Its establishment is intended to strengthen the centrality of Thiers and represents an important step in the regeneration of the small town.

Crémieu: a small historic town experiencing demographic pressure, which is upgrading its living environment

Crémieu is a very small, fortified medieval town with remarkably well-preserved built fabric and 3,300 residents. It is situated in the department of Isère, 40 km east of Lyon. The town grew up through the 13th century thanks to its location on the trading routes between France and the Savoy, Switzerland and Italy. Since the 1980s, activities to establish new land uses and develop the town have multiplied, benefitting from the election of a new proactive municipal board. The town has been subject to strong pressure on the property market due to suburbanisation from Lyon accompanied by a growth in suburban areas and increased need for services and facilities. Development has been encouraged by using commerce, trade and crafts for the conservation of cultural heritage. The measures have led to far-reaching transformations and included the redesigning of housing and the facades of the old centre (in programmes to improve living conditions in the historic centre in 1985-1988, 1991-1993, 1997-1999 and 2017-2021), the upgrading of public spaces (in 1985 and 1990 with *contrats de petites villes* [small town contracts] signed with the *région*), and the improvement of cultural and sporting facilities. The aim is to increase the amount of housing while preserving the built heritage and improving the living environment, and thus to regain inhabitants.

The qualitative approach is made clear in various activities. These include the upgrading of public spaces but also, in recognition of the numerous historic monuments, the creation of a conservation zone for architecture and cultural heritage in 1992, and its regular updating, e.g. the creation of a zone for the upgrading of architecture and cultural heritage in 2019. A similar focus has been put on cultural and tourist activities such as an annual medieval festival involving over 300 volunteers, 200 specialists and 35,000 visitors, and membership of the networks *Les plus beaux détours de France* (The Most Beautiful Detours in France) and – since January 2020

– the *Petite cité de caractère* (Little City of Character). Furthermore, in 2018 the town supported the founding of an association to apply for UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

Since the founding of the *Communauté de communes* ‘Balcons du Dauphiné’ in 2017, a number of the emblematic activities of Crémieu have become the responsibility of the intermunicipal body (housing development with the 2019-2024 local housing programme, cultural events, tourism promotion). The SCoT which was developed in 2007 under the leadership of the mixed syndicate *Boucle du Rhône en Dauphiné* and was updated in 2019, has the aim of preventing the centre of Crémieu from expanding too far so as to avoid the old centre from ‘drowning’ in the middle of an overly large urban ring. Such a scenario would threaten the cultural heritage image of the town. Fundamentally, there is also a risk of gentrification in the town centre, which has regained its attractiveness. This would lead to increased property prices and a large proportion of new inhabitants and visitors from the Lyon agglomeration (advertising and communication is targeted towards Lyon).

The developments in Crémieu represent similar processes to those observed in other towns, even though the intensity of the upgrading of the built heritage is striking. This is certainly linked to local political stability: the year 2020 saw the re-election of the mayor who was first elected in 1983.

5 Closing discussion

The similarities and parallel nature of the scientific discussions and political and planning practice in both countries are astonishing. Small and medium-sized towns have attracted increased attention and interest in the last 15 years. The question raised – not only in France – is which guiding principles are judged by politicians and urban planners to be the right ones for small and medium-sized towns. The policies for small and medium-sized towns implicitly draw on urban development models related to spatial competitiveness that were developed in and for different spatial contexts, frequently for large cities and metropolises (Mainet/Edouard 2014). The communication strategies of small towns therefore often use clichés of large cities in a ‘mimicry’ approach (Mainet 2011; Edouard 2014; Roudier 2019). Like the cities, the small and medium-sized towns tend to employ strategies to increase their attractiveness which are often disconnected from local realities (Berroir/Fol/Quéva et al. 2019) and that illustrate that the ‘*mythologie de la compétitivité, de l’attractivité, de la métropolisation, de l’excellence*’ (‘mythology of competitiveness, attractiveness, metropolisation, excellence’) (Bouba-Olga/Grossetti 2018:1) also captivates the local actors of small and medium-sized towns. Ultimately, supporting the residential economy and quality of life seem to be unassailable goals for public sector engagement in medium-sized towns (Demazière 2014). There are few locally based, alternative development strategies that are better adapted to the local dynamics of small and medium-sized towns (Berroir/Fol/Quéva et al. 2019). The time may be ripe for a public dialogue between science and municipal practice to draw up guiding principles for policy and planning that are better suited to the particularities and local challenges of small and medium-sized towns. The governance perspective of cooperative small-town development could provide orientation here.

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