

## Summary of the concept and results of the BIGS project

### “Integration auf Augenhöhe”



#### *“Integration at eye level – Discourse on Values for refugees by refugees”*

In the context of the challenging influx of refugees from the Middle East to Germany in 2015 and 2016, a number of projects were developed and implemented by civil society organizations with the support by government funding. These measures generally aimed at helping the newcomers finding their place in Germany society. Most of these initiatives focused on language and job training, based on the assumption that those skills are the essentials for a successful integration. The role of culture and values are often underestimated in their importance for a successful integration, which refers here to being a supporter of the key tenants of Germany’s liberal democracy and becoming an empowered member of society.

The project “Integration auf Augenhöhe” (Integration at eye level) was co-created with former refugees and migrants who joined the team as trainers and was aiming at addressing the following questions: How can refugees find their place in German society? Where and how can they openly discuss the various challenges they face? How can the risk be reduced that frustrated newcomers become susceptible to existing recruiting efforts of Islamist organization in Germany?

During the course of the project, an innovative dialogue platform has been created on which intercultural coexistence based on values could be addressed comprehensively and practically. People with refugee backgrounds were encouraged and supported to integrate themselves sustainably into the free democratic value system. To this end, already integrated refugees (or so called *peers*) were trained as cultural mediators. In its capacity as a measure to promote democracy the project also contributed to the prevention of radicalization.

Already integrated refugees, who wanted to play an active role in helping others to integrate, were trained in four-month courses to become cultural mediators who promote liberal democracy and thereby help to prevent radicalisation. During the course of the project, a safe space for peer-learning and open dialogue at “eye level” was considered essential by the participants of our trainings. This method enabled our newcomers to speak openly about their challenges in German society. Those challenges included discussing “taboo topics”, as many

of the participants described them, like religion, sexuality and gender, as well as hot issues like politics, antisemitism and extremism.

The project, which saw 49 cultural mediators successfully finishing the courses, was comprised of five key elements:

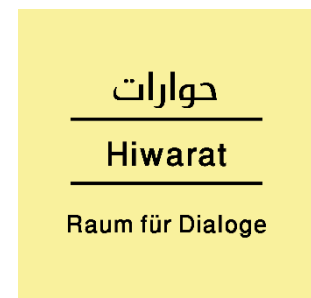
- a) The trainers were former refugees/migrants themselves
- b) The co-creative development of the curriculum with the trainers and participants.
- c) The discourse (mostly) took place in the mother tongue of the newcomers (Arabic)
- d) A safe space for an open and respectful exchange
- e) A focus on fostering knowledge and improving skills (empowerment)

Based on the internal evaluations, using base-line and progress self-assessments, all participants felt they were more competent, confident and motivated to discuss the role of culture and values in the process of integration, also touching taboo or hot topics. Many of them have stayed active in their respective communities working as cultural mediators helping other newcomers to understand what the benefits of living in a liberal society are.

The results of the refugee empowerment approach as a contribution to the prevention of radicalization are summarized in the final project publication, [BIGS Standpunkt Nr. 10 "Wertediskurs anstatt Vermittlung – Ein Ansatz zur Stärkung von Geflüchteten als Beitrag zur Radikalisierungsprävention"](#), written by Alexandra Korn and Caroline von der Heyden (in German).

The pilot project “Augenhöhe” was funded between September 2017 and December 2019 by the federal program “Live Democracy!” (Active Against Right-Wing Extremism, Violence and Xenophobia) program of the Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (BMFSFJ). The project was developed in cooperation with the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD), implemented by the Brandenburg Institute for Society and Security (BIGS) and essentially supported by pedagogical experts from “Hiwarat e.V.” (“Dialogue” in Arabic) and the “Syrian Feminist Lobby e.V”.

Since the end of funding, the project has been based in the association Hiwarat e.V. and is continued by the former project participants. This way, the aim to create safe spaces for mother-tongue exchange about the experiences of living together in an open society can be further realized. In the end, “Augenhöhe” seems to establish itself as an innovative and sophisticated discourse format of refugees for other newcomers, contributing to empathically addressing central liberal and democratic values of our community.



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Gefördert vom



im Rahmen des Bundesprogramms

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