

# Negotiating Germany's first Muslim–Christian kindergarten: Temporalities, multiplicities, and processes in interreligious dialogue

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## Abstract

Drawing on fieldwork in the Northern German town of Gifhorn, the article analyses the negotiation process of Germany's first Muslim–Christian kindergarten during its inception and consolidation phase between 2007 and 2020. Through the reconstruction of the kindergarten case, the study informs the literature on interreligious dialogue and governance of religious diversity from a local perspective. A temporal analysis is used for the study of dialogue to capture changing views and positions of different stakeholders during shifting opportunity structures, including the rise of far-right populism and deteriorating political relations between Germany and Turkey. Hence, the kindergarten, which mirrors Germany's national policy framework of institutionalizing Islam through treaties and dialogue cooperation, can be seen as a stage on which local negotiations and interreligious dynamics play out, uncovering complex intersections within the local, national, and international arena of politics.

## Keywords

Christianity, governance of religious diversity, interreligious dialogue, Islam, temporality

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## Résumé

S'appuyant sur une enquête de terrain dans la ville de Gifhorn, dans le nord de l'Allemagne, l'article analyse le processus de négociation du premier jardin d'enfants islamo-chrétien d'Allemagne pendant sa phase de création et de consolidation entre 2007 et 2020. En reconstruisant le cas de ce jardin d'enfants, l'étude alimente la recherche relative au dialogue interreligieux et à la gouvernance de la diversité religieuse d'un point de vue local. Une analyse temporelle est utilisée pour l'étude du dialogue afin de saisir les changements de points de vue et de positions des différentes parties prenantes dans un contexte de structures d'opportunités changeantes, notamment dans le cadre de la montée du populisme d'extrême droite et de la détérioration des relations politiques entre l'Allemagne et la Turquie. Par conséquent, le jardin d'enfants, qui reflète le cadre politique national de l'Allemagne visant à institutionnaliser l'islam par le biais de traités et d'un dialogue de coopération, peut être considéré comme une scène sur laquelle se déroulent les négociations locales et les dynamiques interreligieuses, révélant des intersections complexes au sein de l'arène politique locale, nationale et internationale.

## Mots-clés

Christianisme, dialogue interreligieux, gouvernance de la diversité religieuse, Islam, temporalité

The article analyses the negotiation process during the inception and consolidation phase of Germany's first Muslim–Christian kindergarten between the local Catholic and Protestant mainline churches, the Christian welfare association, Diakonie, the DITIB (Turkish–Islamic Union for Religious Affairs) mosque<sup>1</sup> and city council in the Northern German town of Gifhorn between 2007 and 2020. Muslim parents in Germany send children less frequently to kindergarten facilities, compared to other groups, while migrant family environments are associated with language and social deficits (Ceylan et al., 2018). Sending migrant children to a kindergarten has therefore been linked to enhanced school performance and career opportunities (Gambaro et al., 2015). The Muslim–Christian kindergarten can be located within the public discourse of how to integrate Muslim children in partnership with local church actors. Religious authorities in Gifhorn perceived the kindergarten as a novel form of an institutionalized dialogue that produces 'conflict mediators' and 'resilient children', who are 'less prone to violence'. The kindergarten's concept stated that stereotypes and gender barriers would be reduced among children through the mutual exploration of each other's religious identities. At the end of February 2020, the kindergarten had 20 children, four teachers and an advisory committee of 12 members from different faith communities and the city council. The kindergarten's interreligious pedagogy is not the focus of this article. Instead, the case study can be seen as a stage on which local negotiations and interreligious dynamics play out, uncovering complex intersections with the local, national, and international arena of politics.

Thereby, the research aims to complement the small but growing body of literature on interreligious dialogue (dialogue here after) as an important factor for the governance of

religious diversity at the local level. The kindergarten, which mirrors Germany's national framework of institutionalizing Islam through local and national treaties and dialogue cooperation (Körs, 2019; Spielhaus and Herzog, 2015), constitutes an interesting case, where to observe a variety of attitudes regarding the negotiation, implementation and resistance of such an integration policy at the subnational level over time. The article starts by setting out the local dialogue and German institutional context, before the case study and empirical findings are discussed. A temporal and processual analysis for the study of dialogue is employed to better capture internal diversity, changing views, and coalition-building among different actors at the micro and macro levels. Definitions of dialogue often include peace prayers, joint sermons, art exhibitions, religious summits, institutionalized forms, such as religious education in schools, national events, including the German Islam Conference or global initiatives (Griera and Nagel, 2018; Klinkhammer et al., 2011). However, few concrete outcomes at the local level have been discussed in the literature, partially because dialogue results are hard to grasp and difficult to operationalize (Klinkhammer, 2019). By focusing on a concrete and time-sensitive outcome, such as a kindergarten, resulting from a continuous negotiation, the subsequent analysis contributes to our understanding how local dialogue materializes and develops at different stages during that process. In doing so, the article informs the literature on the governance of religious diversity, which recently stressed the value of comparative research and importance of context-specific and processual case studies (Martínez-Ariño, 2019). The empirical discussion focuses on competing economic and political interests and the role of religious authorities during the inception and implementation phase and the fabrication of liberal partners and the changing role of dialogue actors during the consolidation phase. Whether the kindergarten could influence other local municipalities and the extra-local context is scrutinized in the conclusion.

## **Dialogue governance at the local level**

In the last 20 years, the number of dialogue platforms increased across Europe as response to migration, religious diversity, and security concerns through interreligious value promotion (Griera and Forteza, 2011; Nordin, 2017). Scholars of the governance of religious diversity recently started to focus on the interplay between legal and national frameworks and practices at the local level (Giorgi and Itçaina, 2016; Saint-Blancat, 2019; Zapata et al., 2017). Within local governance, established faith actors (particularly mainline churches) are perceived as policy brokers, whose contributions to the management of religious diversity are rewarded with funding and recognition (Weller, 2009). For religious minorities, local partnerships via dialogue constitute an opportunity to achieve pragmatic ends and assert their voices in the public domain (Davie, 2004; Griera and Forteza, 2011). Moreover, incentives for local religious actors to replace state services contributed to the de-centralization of mainline churches, providing congregations with autonomy and responsibility to be financially sustainable and cooperate with other religious groups and state bodies (Griera and Nagel, 2018; Williams et al., 2012). Hence, multilevel research on dialogue is important, due to the shift from top-down regulations to pluricentric governance networks with manifold interdependent actors, who 'draw their legitimacy from proposing to function as a negotiation mechanism for the common good,

including societal harmony and good ethnic relations'. (Martikainen, 2013: 140–141). With the local turn, scholars started to investigate 'the multiplicity of factors that interact to shape how religion and religious diversity are conceived of, problematized, and governed in urban settings' (Martínez-Ariño, 2019: 367). Thereby, they identified different trajectories of governing religious diversity within and across nation states being influenced by specific local constellations (Mezzetti and Ricucci, 2019) and how local contexts of religious governance are shaped by national and transnational realities (Müller, 2019).

To capture these local dynamics, interactionist and processual approaches for the study of interreligious events have been used, enhancing our understanding of religious boundary maintenance and transgression (Moyaert, 2017; Nagel, 2019b). Stakeholders may change views, affiliations and strategies or being replaced, due to shifting opportunity structures at the micro and macro levels. The temporal nature of dialogue needs to be documented and explained, since the reasons for such changes in opinion, social location, or allegiance over time constitutes a crucial layer of analysis for dialogue research. In her study of unsuccessful interreligious events, Moyaert (2017: 339) suggests that future investigations on dialogue should include an analysis of process transformation over time, 'focusing on [interreligious] ritual negotiation and re-negotiation'. Körs (2019: 466), who studied the negotiations over religious education in schools between Muslims, Alevi and state officials in Hamburg, argued that such cooperation 'is the product of complex local, regional, and (trans-) national processes. A closer look [. . .] reveals how the relationships change over time and in particular how the local pragmatics of the initiation and negotiation phases are [eventually] caught up by the national framework conditions and transnational developments'. In the empirical section, I follow a processual, ethnographic approach to demonstrate that dialogue trajectories and the role of individual actors change at different stages during interreligious kindergarten cooperation. By focusing on a concrete and time-sensitive outcome, such as a kindergarten, from a continuous dialogue, the empirical discussion aims to refine our understanding of interreligious relations from a local perspective.

## **Dialogue with Muslims in Germany**

Since the 1970s, German mainline churches assisted Muslim migrants, as secular welfare associations inadequately catered to certain religious needs. These initial encounters led to the creation of the Islamic–Christian Labour Group and more systematic exchanges by the 1980s (Klinkhammer et al., 2011; Tezcan, 2006). The German government also has a long tradition of cooperating with organized religious groups, which obtained the status of a public corporation (Körperschaft des öffentlichen Rechts). This means that these faith groups are entitled to collect taxes, open schools, and kindergartens, and operate social service facilities. Historically, such public partners have been the mainline Catholic and Protestant churches and the Jewish community (Körs and Nagel, 2018). Although Germany's Muslims tried to become recognized partners since the 1970s, the momentum and urgency for partnership only increased during recent debates about institutionalizing Islam in Germany (Rosenow, 2012). So far, few Muslim communities achieved legal recognition (e.g. in Hessen and Hamburg), leaving them somewhat disillusioned.

While acknowledging the symbolic significance of recognition, Spielhaus and Herzog (2015), however, stress the broadening of participatory possibilities for German Muslims. In particular, at state and local level, pragmatic policy solutions enable cooperation between Muslims and federal states via regional or local treaties. Germany has 16 federal states (Länder) with independent cultural policies, in which minorities are required to deal with state partners for religious accommodation and practice. This is reflected in the recent introduction of state-level branches by Muslim associations to advance regional integration and increase interreligious partnerships. Lower Saxony, where the Muslim–Christian kindergarten materialized, has played a pioneering role for recognizing Muslims as cooperation partners in Islamic education in schools (2012), chaplaincies in prisons (2012) or theology chairs at universities (2013). However, concerns regarding the constitutional loyalty, incompatibility with gender equality of Islamic associations, mutual suspicion, and unequal power relations accompanied the negotiation process (Ceylan, 2017). In January 2017, the state government of Lower Saxony stopped negotiations over the cooperation treaty (Staatsvertrag) entirely with its Muslim partner associations. Its failure was a result of the increasing political tension between Berlin and Ankara after the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016 that was followed by allegations against Turkish imams to spy on political opponents in Germany. The developments in Lower Saxony partially reflect the situation of Muslims in Germany, regarding contested nature of regional integration, and constitute a relevant case study for the inquiry into the governance of religious diversity at the local level.

Furthermore, the regional integration of German Muslims challenged the influence of national and foreign-based Islamic authorities (Rosenow, 2012), while German federal states realized the potential of institutionalizing Islam and thereby domesticating Muslims for security and integration-related purposes in the post-9/11 context (Schiffauer, 2006). Within these multi-level negotiations over the future of Islam in Germany, dialogue initiatives by local churches acquired prominent roles. As a consequence, established Christian and Islamic authorities became concerned about diminishing control of grassroots constituencies and religious profiles. From 2001 onwards, the national leadership of the German Protestant Church (EKD), attempted to curb dialogues, warning against religious relativism and promoting rigid boundaries between Christians and Muslims (Bölsche, 2001; EKD, 2006). This constituted a departure from previous agendas, which were more open toward dialogue (EKD, 2000). Catholic authorities, albeit less critical toward dialogue, intervened in congregations, where grassroots actors were overly accommodating. Moreover, Muslim associations became increasingly concerned about the autonomy of local mosques and regional leaders over the past 15 years. DITIB, for instance, developed its own centralized dialogue training to restrain grassroots initiatives (Klinkhammer, 2019; Rosenow, 2012). DITIB's kindergarten involvement in this context can also be understood as an attempt to promote a middle way between a Turkish national identity by protecting the heritage language and culture and increasing accommodation toward a German Islam and local partnerships. Moreover, DITIB's dialogue participation aims at countering the ongoing domestication of Islam in Germany and repairing its tarnished national reputations (Yükleyen, 2012). The centralization efforts by religious authorities are negotiated, accepted, and resisted within these vast institutional networks, reverberating strongly at the local level. The empirical

analysis engages with the tension between established religious authorities and progressive grassroots actors, illustrating the ongoing multi-level debates within these institutions. The next section provides a brief chronology of the kindergarten, which lays out the foundation for the temporal analysis in the empirical discussion.

## **A Muslim–Christian kindergarten: methods and chronology**

With a population of 42,000, Gifhorn is located 65 km from Hanover, the State Capital of Lower Saxony. Civil servants described the town, which is ruled by the conservative Christian Democratic Party (CDU) since 1961, by emphasizing its pragmatism ('*Bodenständigkeit*') and local trust. Gifhorn has four mosques (ethnically dominated by either Turkish, Kurdish, or Albanian communities) and over 30 church communities. Fieldwork was conducted in autumn 2018 and winter 2020, engaging 32 mosque and church leaders,<sup>2</sup> lay members of different congregations, kindergarten staff and parents, local politicians, civil servants, journalists, and experts at the state and national levels in Lower Saxony (Hanover, Lüneburg, Osnabrück, and Hildesheim). The selected respondents were directly responsible for or knowledgeable of the kindergarten and wider interreligious relations in Gifhorn. I also conducted participant observations within the kindergarten, church services, Friday prayers, open mosque days, and an intercultural council to engage different audiences. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, the names of interviewees and locations have been changed or omitted. In addition, archival documents, concept notes, event flyers, and newspaper articles (between 2000 and 2020) were analyzed to reconstruct the kindergarten developments.

Gifhorn has a long history of migration and subsequent dialogue that can be traced back to the intercultural Europa Fest in 1986 being established to reduce the rising tension between Turkish and newly arriving migrants from the Soviet Union. In 2007, informal attempts, regarding cooperation, took place between the leaders of two mainline churches and the DITIB mosque. The Protestant side, however, was unwilling to cooperate after its national leadership spoke against dialogue (EKD, 2006). The first recorded interreligious initiative was a peace prayer in April 2012 followed by a sermon for the annual harvest festival in 2013, where two mosques participated. In January 2015, the idea of the interreligious kindergarten emerged. The district newspaper, Gifhorer Rundschau, published an interview with the DITIB mosque chairman and two church leaders as part of a series on religions in the district. The Rundschau was concerned with social cohesion in Gifhorn, after violent clashes between Yazidis and Muslims in the neighboring town of Celle in October 2014.<sup>3</sup> Hence, the rationale for the series was to inquire 'if such violence could also break out in Gifhorn'. As the interview coincided with the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, the DITIB chairman was confronted by the event organizer how he ensures that Islam is not manipulated for political violence in Gifhorn. He was then asked during the discussion what he thinks of sending his children into a Christian kindergarten. Due to the changing demography in the mosque, the chairman argued that the community would like to open its own kindergarten. 'I understand, but I think it would be wrong', replied the Catholic leader. 'I suggest, we cooperate and start

a kindergarten together'. The pragmatic chairman, who was locally known for his commitment to Muslim teenagers, agreed and the idea of Germany's first Muslim–Christian kindergarten was born.

During my fieldwork, church and state actors admitted without hesitation that they thought a degree of Christian supervision was required for such an interreligious enterprise. These views reflected the consensus that the mosque should not have an independent kindergarten to prevent segregation, avoid 'bad press' and integrate Muslims through cooperation. Expressions, such as 'drifting away' ('abdriften'), 'seclusion' ('Abschottung'), or 'special room' ('Sonderraum') were used to express the fear of segregation. A local official made the level of uneasiness explicit: 'Sure, there are regulations, which they have to follow in theory. But, when the door [of a Muslim kindergarten] is closed, what will really happen there?' Such attitudes regarding the Muslim kindergarten mirror wider concerns of creating parallel structures by German policy makers and church actors (Seiwert, 2003; Tezcan, 2006).

The Rundschau interview was followed by an interreligious summit in Gifhorn's castle in April 2015, where the kindergarten plan was announced. The summit with 120 attendees from various churches and mosques provided a glimpse into the antagonistic public debate that emerged over the next 3 years, when fears about cooperating with Muslims were raised. A Muslim attendee recalled a sense of discomfort: 'We were invited to talk about contributions to our city but were mainly confronted with security-related questions about Islam'. After the summit, informal negotiations started without public involvement. First, local leaders of the Catholic church spoke with the DITIB mosque, which 'only took two hours to realize that there are no real hurdles'. The two parties planned to involve the Protestant church (the most powerful religious authority in the region) to avoid negative press, whereby the Catholic minority church could be accused for partnering up with DITIB. However, the Protestant church declined, due to disagreements within the leadership, which led to the 'second best option', the free Diakonie (a Christian welfare association with 1200 employees in the region). Although the Diakonie is affiliated with the Protestant church, it maintains a high degree of autonomy, as a result of the privatization of religious services over the last 15 years. From autumn 2016, monthly meetings between the DITIB mosque, Catholic church, and Diakonie took place being remembered as 'amicable' by participants. By winter 2017, most millstones (e.g. halal food for all, German language of instruction, pedagogical concepts) had been decided, the city council was involved for the implementation phase and media attention increased, in the context of the accelerating polarization in Germany. While the political situation between Turkey and Germany deteriorated at national level due to the so-called 'DITIB spy affair', the kindergarten treaty was signed in Gifhorn's townhall on 28 April 2017.

## **Tension during Implementation**

In June 2017, the local branch of the far-right party, Alternative for Germany (AFD) started its agitation by demanding a name change from 'Christian–Muslim' to 'multi-faith kindergarten'. The AFD campaign intensified as the kindergarten failed to open – as initially planned – in October 2017, because it struggled to meet the mandatory enrolment

numbers. First, the application had to be modified as it required a special permission from the city council for the desired quota system (of 30% Christian, 30% Muslim, and 30% non-affiliated children). Second, a location issue appeared, creating uncertainty, which was combined with parental concerns over the use of ‘Turkish-language’ or rumors of becoming a Christian ‘missionary’ kindergarten. In early 2018, the kindergarten almost failed (‘a real low point’), as political support dwindled. At this critical junction, the AFD campaign reached its peak. In March 2018, AFD politicians escalated the debate by publishing a press statement, entitled ‘Halal-Kindergarten in Gifhorn has epically failed’, followed by a scandal in the city council assembly, in which the AFD accused the mayor to compromise the well-being of German children by collaborating with the Turkish government. Several politicians left the room as a result of the offensive statements. An eyewitness later recalled that ‘a right-wing ideology was openly promoted [during the assembly]’. The newly established AFD branch welcomed the kindergarten theme and mobilized against halal food and societal fears of a cultural invasion. Shortly after, an AFD chapter in Frankfurt circulated the following social media slogan: ‘Islamization progresses: Islamic dietary rules are now compulsory for all children in Gifhorn’s kindergarten’. Interviewees from political parties and religious communities agreed that the aggressive AFD campaign reactivated the political momentum to demonstrate ‘unity’ and that ‘a local fringe group cannot be allowed to dictate civil society affairs’. The incumbent CDU government then realized that it can politically capitalize from defending the kindergarten and thus Gifhorn’s liberal reputation in public.

Through internal mobilization within the mosque and churches, all vacant spots were filled, and the kindergarten opened in August 2018. The time surrounding the opening continued to be polarized, coinciding with the so-called ‘Özil debate’.<sup>4</sup> Kindergarten staff, committee members, and politicians received personal threats and an offensive flyer campaign commenced across Gifhorn. During the opening press conference, more than 80 people attended, including national Christian and Muslim leaders and various local stakeholders from the municipality and civil society. National newspapers extensively reported, the public television channel, NDR, filmed and Germany’s domestic security agency (Verfassungsschutz) deployed two covert officials to monitor and prevent a potential attack. In the following months, various high-profile politicians, including the State President of Lower Saxony and the Minister of Culture visited to show support. After the inception, the kindergarten consolidated in the first year with full enrolment, committed staff and parents and reduced media attention, while interreligious events among the three communities intensified, including a joint art exhibition.

This brief history illustrated how the emergence of the kindergarten was influenced by the post-9/11 discourse on diversity management and the integration of Muslims via local cooperation. The negotiations have also been entangled with national and international developments, such as right-wing populism, national media coverage, state-level politics, and deteriorated relations between Germany and Turkey. To further analyze the multi-level themes of the case study, the next section discusses some underlying dynamics during the inception and consolidation phase, such as the notion of the instrumental Muslim, the role of religious authorities, and the fabrication of liberal partnerships. Using a temporal analysis, the discussion goes beyond resource deficit and

actor-centric explanations and contributes to the literature that focuses on processual and interactionist perspectives.

## **Resource deficits and competing economic interests**

Scholarship on dialogue argues that Muslim participants often enter local dialogue partnerships for pragmatic reasons and tangible results, while Church actors are motivated by a wish to advance theological debates and mutual understanding for social cohesion on behalf of local governance (Körs and Nagel, 2018; Nagel, 2019b; Nagel and Kalender, 2014; Tezcan, 2006). However, my data indicate that all dialogue stakeholders (the two mainline churches, Diakonie and DITIB) pursued vested and often mutually competing economic interests: protecting their faith-based economic monopoly within the contested kindergarten sectors or expanding into new territory through dialogue.

Gifhorn lacked 220 kindergarten places in 2020, mirroring the deficit trend across Germany, which is why new kindergarten schemes are welcomed by politicians. Encouraged by government subsidiaries for kindergarten proposals, several operators from municipalities (35%), Protestant (25%) and Catholic churches (18%) and private companies run kindergartens and are – at times – in fierce competition with each other (Linberg et al., 2013). Local churches utilized the kindergarten deficit within municipalities to attract financial resources, advance religious profiles, and offer distinct faith-based curricula (Rösler, 2015). Muslim associations also discussed such expansion plans at national and regional meetings, which rarely translated into implementation. Accreditation processes for Muslim-led kindergartens are heavily scrutinized, which partly explains why there are less than 40 Muslim kindergartens across Germany and none in Lower Saxony (Charchira, 2017; Hollenbach, 2017). For an interreligious kindergarten endeavor, such as in Gifhorn with established Christian partners, a civil servant in Hanover reflected that ‘the risk [of failure] is much lower . . . It can only be positive if a mosque can hide behind an established faith-based welfare association . . . [being] very careful to comply with our legal system’. The experience with bureaucracy also shaped the perception within mosques in Gifhorn, which was polemically expressed by a local member, imitating the city council: ‘You, Islamist . . . want a Kindergarten? Forget it! Whether it is a school or kindergarten, as soon as Muslims lead the initiative, the fear emerges that Germany will be Islamized’. Despite such reservations, the mosque committee was pragmatic, accepting the cooperation offer, despite its yearning for an independent kindergarten. At the DITIB state level, the interreligious kindergarten became a viable option to improve the image of the national association. This was influenced by the recent political setbacks and prolonged efforts to set up kindergartens on its own and an awareness that churches may become vocal public opponents, when they were not incorporated in the planning phase.

Moreover, when the Protestant church declined its involvement in Gifhorn, its own kindergarten committee, operating eight facilities, regarded the Catholic partner as a competitor within a contested market. The independent Diakonie, on the contrary, welcomed the cooperation offer to expand its educational services into a new territory as it only operated kindergartens in Hanover until then. These instrumental considerations

were expressed in a business-like language. Key stakeholders envisioned the Muslim–Christian kindergarten as ‘product’, ‘franchise’, ‘model project’, ‘start-up’, or as ‘beneficial for the economic prosperity of the region’. Such local pragmatism is reflected in the fusion of economic concerns with integration policy as well as an increasing interest of cultural and religious competency in the private and public sector (Rosenow, 2012; Vertovec, 2014). The consensus among partners and parents about the kindergarten’s integration and product potential caused resentment and concern by established operators. During the 25th anniversary of a Protestant kindergarten, the principal assured that she was not alarmed by the new competitor: ‘We have up to 30 percent Muslims. There is no issue here . . . whether it is with sermons or Christmas celebrations’. Other church actors dismissed the interreligious concept, arguing that existing facilities sufficiently cater for Muslims, but were nevertheless concerned about the prospect of having to reflect and modify their own time-proven pedagogic and diversity approaches.

Finally, studies emphasized that local mosques rarely contribute to dialogue and heavily rely on state-level leaders, because of a resource deficit (Klinkhammer et al., 2011; Tezcan, 2006). However, for concrete and complex dialogue projects, including a kindergarten the resource advantage of local churches may be over-stated. During implementation, church and mosque leaders outsourced key tasks (e.g. developing a concept note, cooperation treaty, legal framework) to respective experts within their state-level associations in Hanover and Hildesheim. A technocrat in Hanover recalled that ‘local actors [in Gifhorn] only contributed in a limited fashion. It is not a critique towards them, but the normal process’. Through the time-sensitive kindergarten example, the section could demonstrate that all stakeholders pursued vested and often mutually competing interests, highlighting the intersection between local religious and state-level actors.

## **The role of religious authorities**

Established religious authorities have been seen to be detrimental for grassroots dialogue (Griera and Nagel, 2018; Klinkhammer, 2019; Klinkhammer et al., 2011; Körs, 2018). In Gifhorn, internal leadership disputes over faith-based labor rights (e.g. ‘homogeneity of employees’ meaning Christian staff only) and theological positions within the local Protestant church initially jeopardized the kindergarten project, which corresponds with the critical stance of the national leadership toward dialogue with Muslims (Bölsche, 2001; EKD, 2006). A Christian respondent, who was part of the negotiation, recalled ‘one camp within the Protestant kindergarten committee that strongly felt Christians are not obliged to cooperate with Muslims, which threatens the Christian profile’. However, the kindergarten example revealed that segments within the leadership departed from this non-cooperative position. Although the church did not officially cooperate, behind the scene, sections in the local and state-level leadership supported the kindergarten. A committee member called it ‘a blessing that some key people [within the Protestant church] continued to push the project and facilitated the transition to the Diakonie’. Furthermore, the Regional Bishop attended the opening press conference and held a ‘passionate speech’, expressing symbolic support. Christian respondents interpreted

these developments as an ongoing paradigm change within the Protestant mainline church regarding the current trajectory of interreligious relations and cooperation with Muslims.

Although Muslim leaders have been described as self-serving and detrimental to local dialogue, my data suggests that these authorities are important for interreligious projects at different stages. State-level DITIB actors, being conscientious of DITIB's tarnished national reputation, deliberately operated in the background, offered their advice or full withdrawal to church partners, refused to give public statements, and convinced the Turkish attaché to refrain from attending the press conference. 'As the [kindergarten] opening overlapped with the [DITIB] spy affair', a Muslim leader recalled, 'imagine the headline if our attaché gave a speech'. His instinct proved far-sighted. When a local Turkish supermarket provided water bottles from the manufacturer 'Istanbul' during the press conference, the AFD publicly commented, 'the water came from Istanbul. Was it donated by the [Turkish] president?' There was further evidence of a horizontal knowledge transfer, when – for instance – DITIB leaders 'calmed down' their church partners as the kindergarten was attacked by far-right groups. Due to DITIB's long experience with aggressive AFD campaigns, it could advise the other partners how to deal with such a polarized situation. Without the support by religious authorities, the interreligious kindergarten may not have happened.

## **No return from interreligious partnership**

Dialogue research seeks to explain why interreligious undertakings failed, when Muslim partners withdraw, due to the lack of capacity, equal footing, suitable content, and practical goals (Klinkhammer et al., 2011; Moyaert, 2017; Ohrt and Kalender, 2018). However, the pressure to continue dialogue partnerships, despite these inherent reasons, has not been fully understood. In doing so, I briefly describe an interreligious art exhibition that followed the opening of the kindergarten. After the successful inception of the kindergarten in 2018, future dialogues seemed to flourish, due to increased trust among the partners. However, tension surfaced during a subsequent initiative that threatened the consolidation of the kindergarten. In the past, interreligious events took place on neutral grounds (e.g. market square), but after the kindergarten success, church actors felt confident to encourage mutual in-house visits. In late 2019, an evening program with musical entertainment, short lectures, and media coverage was designed by local artists in the two churches and mosque over three nights. The mosque-based exhibition, however, overwhelmed the congregation and newly elected mosque committee, which was not involved in the planning. (The former committee, which initiated the kindergarten, ran the mosque affairs for 8 years and was only recently replaced). The imam, who felt disrespected in 'his own house', disallowed the music performance inside the prayer room, which irritated the other organizers, who hastily arranged alternatives. The imam also rejected reading the pre-selected Quranic passage by one artist and chose instead a 'more suitable' text, which was celebrated by some mosque members as an act of micro-resistance against the perceived intrusion. Previous participation of the imam had been frequently prevented by church partners from the beginning of the kindergarten negotiation, due to perceived

language and cultural conflicts. The Christian partners that day were even more confused as the Muslim evening prayer (maghrib) was not postponed, causing further delay. While artists blamed the ‘inflexible’ imam for the tension, the new mosque committee felt disempowered and concerned over the local media reception. One Muslim participant explained that ‘even if we wanted to withdraw, it became impossible. The band was ready to play . . . [and] a journalist had arrived’. Similar concerns were expressed within segments of the Catholic congregation, perceiving the ad hoc and publicity-driven exhibition as interruption of the church’s ritualistic emphasis. The exhibition intersected with growing concerns within the new mosque committee over the kindergarten responsibility. As a result, internal discussions started whether to pass on the kindergarten to Hanover. However, because of the symbolic significance and concerns of negative publicity, DITIB state-level office bearers pressed the local committee (by a word of command or ‘Machtwort’) to compromise, after which the mosque reluctantly ensured its continued involvement.

The tension during the exhibition that threatened the kindergarten consolidation can be explained by a multi-level elite consensus among religious and government actors and the subsequent resistance by the mosque congregation, electing a new leadership in 2019. While there is an agreement about the exclusive character of dialogue toward inward-looking congregations and ethnic diversity (Griera and Nagel, 2018; Nagel and Kalender, 2014; Tezcan, 2006), intra-congregational exclusion and the internal fabrication of liberal partners can partially account for conflicts within these dialogue constellations. Given the politicized DITIB label and organizational ties to Turkey, church actors in Gifhorn had to invest substantive efforts to justify the partnership with the mosque. This was done, for instance, by pointing toward the churches’ internal mistakes (e.g. pedophilia cases) or differentiating between trusted local mosque actors (e.g. those who work for local industry) and an alienated and foreign imam. Furthermore, during the kindergarten’s implementation phase, DITIB state-level leaders from Hanover visited Gifhorn and consulted with the city council in 2016 to ensure continuity in dealing with Christian partners and protect the kindergarten plan. In doing so, DITIB together with local CDU politicians unprecedentedly campaigned for the more ‘suitable’ and ‘open-minded’ committee team during the mosque election to prevent religious ‘hardliners’ from taking over. This top-down intervention corresponds with the research on dialogue initiatives in Switzerland by Baumann and Tunger-Zanetti (2018), who argue that dialogue partners require the ‘image of being “reformist” or “liberal” [but] may not be quite representative of the broader scope of that [religious] tradition’. In 2019, 1 year after the kindergarten opened, the ‘liberal’ mosque committee was not re-elected and replaced by new actors, who disapproved of the elite consensus and church patronage. While the new mosque committee was seen as inward-looking by Christian and DITIB leaders, the election result indicated a democratic longing against the top-down dialogue, which did not resonate with the congregation’s wish for autonomy and grassroots consensus. In other words, the new mosque committee partially questioned the universalizing project of the interfaith movement by emphasizing ethnic and religious belonging over the homogenizing tendencies of interreligious governance (Nassehi, 2006). This section illustrated the temporal nature and bottom-up influence of dialogue, where leaders can be voted out, replaced or side-lined for ignoring the preferences of their support base.

However, such resistance had to be carefully balanced, due to internal and external sanctions. ‘We entered a brotherhood’, as noted by a senior mosque member, implying the difficulty to withdraw from dialogue.

## **Temporal actor analysis**

The importance of local (church) actors, assisting municipalities in governing religious diversity, has been analyzed in the literature (Griera and Forteza, 2011; Tezcan, 2006). Dialogue mediators have been described as explorers of new religious frontiers, who are theologically and socially inclusive (Klinkhammer et al., 2011). By looking at chronological processes, my findings suggest that the role of local actors changes during different stages. In the beginning, charismatic and media-experienced individuals were vital for the kindergarten’s implementation in Gifhorn. However, during the consolidation phase, the same personalities could become detrimental to intra- and interreligious relations, which led to their partial replacement. Paradoxically, the lack of equal footing and selective inclusion in combination with pragmatic compromises and an elite consensus worked in the beginning of the kindergarten project, but eventually unsettled relations, in particular where congregations became overwhelmed with heightening expectations in the post-implementation phase. The reconfiguration during the kindergarten consolidation mirrors Weber (1978 [1914]) notion of the routinization of charisma, indicating an institutionalization process and transition toward bureaucratic organization within dialogue cooperation.

The powerful and – at times – unaccountable role of individual actors in dialogue has further repercussions, especially where key stakeholders are part of a selective chain with exclusive channels to local officials, deciding who participates. A mainline church actor in Gifhorn detested the expanding Pentecostal churches and therefore prevented their involvement in dialogue events. Another respondent regretted the exclusive name choice of ‘Muslim–Christian’ kindergarten as it invited criticism for Jewish exclusion and charges of anti-Semitism. Although, there is no organized Jewish community in Gifhorn, the rabbi in neighboring city of Wolfsburg was asked to cooperate symbolically for that reason. Baumann and Tunger-Zanetti (2018) argued that dialogue actors differentiated between ‘unwanted’, ‘must have’ and ‘nice to have’ partners. In such cases, the ‘self-regulating’ nature of these networks becomes problematic, resulting in the ‘oligarchization’ of decision-making power (Nagel, 2019a). In Gifhorn, key individuals claimed that dialogue projects improved relationships between different mosques in particular through the inclusive kindergarten committee that promised one seat to the Kurdish community. According to a senior church leader, ‘the cooperation between the Turkish and Kurdish mosque in the committee constitutes an enormous achievement for [Gifhorn’s] integration policy. Through [the kindergarten], we reduced barriers, which were built by the different mosque communities in the past’. Klinkhammer et al. (2011) also found that dialogue actors frequently moderate inner-ethnic conflicts and thus acquire a reputation as integration experts. However, my data raises questions, whether such claims over inclusion might be used strategically (e.g. to avoid being labeled ‘DITIB kindergarten’), rather than as a genuine attempt of inclusion. To date, no other (including the Kurdish) mosque was invited to the kindergarten, despite claims of

cross-ethnic participations, which was justified by Christian committee members through resource deficits on the Muslim side. This, however, was not confirmed by interviewees from the other mosques, who expressed a continued interest to participate in the ‘prestigious’ project. Interestingly, the new DITIB mosque committee (‘hardliners’) revived communication with local Arab and Kurdish communities, being interpreted as a ‘promising change’. The previous mosque committee, which initiated the kindergarten, was described as reluctant to share its achievements and exclusive city council networks with other mosques. While this partially confirms oligarchization trends within dialogue, my findings demonstrate that using a temporal approach, we can see that attitudes and directions of local leaders and congregations may change, leading to modification or resistance to local dialogue, and multi-level (elite) governance.

## **Conclusion**

Using the case study of Germany’s first Muslim–Christian kindergarten, the article investigated internal and multi-layered dynamics, (dis-)agreements and conflicting interests within these religious and government actors. Using a processual perspective, the analysis demonstrated how a dialogue project can change direction over time, resist the status quo, threaten or ensure consolidation and contribute to a grassroots consensus, due to micro- and macro-level transformations. Thereby, I showed how local negotiations were influenced by extra-local events, such as the tension between Germany and Turkey or the rise of far-right populism, and how local and state-level religious authorities navigated that tension. Through the case study, the article contributed to the ‘local turn’ in the religious governance literature (Martínez-Ariño, 2019) and the recent application of time-sensitive and processual methods within research on dialogue (Moyaert, 2017; Nagel, 2019b).

The kindergarten has been a result of localized post-9/11 security concerns and national integration policy, in which church actors became key policy brokers for communal harmony. Competing political and economic interests were expressed regarding a potential market niche in Germany’s overburdened early-education sectors. Given the difficulties by Islamic associations to set up their own Muslim kindergartens, interreligious partnerships were further perceived as a viable alternative and a means to repair public legitimacy at the national level. The kindergarten also reflected the ongoing debate regarding dialogue with Muslims within the Protestant and Catholic mainline churches, which recently became more accommodating. In sum, the case study constitutes a unique vantage point into broader debates about the ongoing institutionalization of Islam in Germany and state- society relations through dialogue at the local level and beyond.

In August 2021, Gifhorn announced that the kindergarten is relocated to a refurbished villa to enrol up to 115 children, due to a private investor, who was interested in supporting the interreligious concept. Whether similar kindergartens can be replicated in other contexts, influence public policy and become role models for the integration of minorities through local treaties and cooperation is difficult to predict. The kindergarten cooperation constituted an important step toward the institutional equality and integration of Islam at the local level as an outcome of a resilient multi-level governance network.

However, similar to macro-level negotiations over state contracts, it exposed various mechanisms of selective exclusion (e.g. of other ethnic mosques) and inclusion (e.g. of the rabbi), as well as internal boundary framing between liberal and inward-looking actors. Given the institutional obstacles (e.g. accreditation) and public repercussions for all stakeholders involved, individual commitment comes with considerable social and psychological costs. Negotiations over a Jewish–Muslim–Christian kindergarten are currently ongoing in Berlin, while a Jewish–Christian kindergarten and Jewish–Muslim–Christian primary school have been successfully established in Osnabruck. Preliminary findings indicate that motivations, trajectories, negotiations, and encountered obstacles are dissimilar compared to Gifhorn. Additional comparative research into these and other concrete and time-sensitive dialogue outcomes could therefore yield interesting insights at the subnational level and reveal general mechanisms regarding the negotiations, partnerships, and governance of religious diversity through dialogue.

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### Notes

1. DITIB was founded in Cologne 1984, after Germany requested state-monitored imams from Turkey to prevent the rise of political Islam through autonomous mosques. It is the largest and increasingly more controversial umbrella organization for Turkish mosque congregations in Germany, representing more than 900 of 2200 German mosques (Halm et al., 2012).
2. Gifhorn has four mainline Protestant and two Catholic churches as well as an expanding number of Baptist, Adventists, New Apostolic, Pentecostal, Moravian (Brüdergemeinde), and Greek and Russian Orthodox congregations, due to the arrival migrants from the former Soviet Union, since the 1990s.
3. Massenschlägerei in Celle mit Jesiden und Muslimen. *Welt*, 7 October 2014.
4. Mesut Özil, a German footballer, resigned from the national team in July 2018, due to alleged discrimination. During heated debates that preoccupied and polarized the public discourse, the loyalty and patriotism of Özil and Germans with Turkish backgrounds were questioned.

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