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Teaching Democracy: The Role of the German Orientation Course for Refugees from Authoritarian Regimes

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Abstract: *To support immigrants in becoming familiar with German culture and politics, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees has developed the so-called orientation course, the final course module of the integration course, a German language and culture class consisting of 700 teaching units. Given that many participants come from authoritarian regimes, this course often represents their primary—if not only—exposure to political education in the context of democratic values. This article examines the legal and structural framework, curriculum, and teaching materials of the orientation course to assess its effectiveness in fostering a democratic culture. The analysis reveals that structural contradictions and deficits—both within and outside the course—hinder the internalization of democratic principles. These limitations create a paternalistic environment that is incompatible with fostering self-reliance and democratic engagement.*

Keywords: *Orientation Course; Political Education; Democratic Competence; Democratic Culture; Structural Obstacles; Integration; Refugees*

INTRODUCTION

Over sixty years ago, Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1972, 4) concluded that democracies require democratic citizens to achieve stability. They embarked on the challenging task of defining what makes a citizen truly democratic, determining that such a citizen must possess specific competencies, values, and emotional connections to genuinely support a "pluralistic culture based on communication and persuasion, a culture of consensus and diversity, a culture that permitted change but moderated it"—a concept they referred to as "the civic culture" (Almond & Verba 1972, 8-15).

Hard to define and even harder to develop, this article attempts to examine an educational program that seeks to do just that, but under very different circumstances than those in which Almond and Verba conducted their foundational study.

A multitude of international crises continues to force thousands of people to flee their home countries and search for asylum in Western democracies. Over the last decade, the number of refugees and asylum seekers has doubled globally, reaching 122.6 million (BPB 2020; UNHCR 2025). While most refugees flee within their own country or to neighboring countries, many attempt to migrate to the European Union (EU). By the first half of 2024, over 3.5 million refugees with a wide range of legal protection statuses were living in Germany (BT-Drs. 20/13040). To integrate individuals who have been granted, or are likely to be granted, permanent permission to reside in Germany, the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees has established the so-called integration course (*Integrationskurs*). This course comprises 700 teaching units, each lasting 45 minutes in duration.

600 of those aiming to study the German language to a level sufficient for workplace integration and 100 teaching units to establish orientation in German culture and politics (BAMF 2025). Considering that a large number of participants in these courses come from authoritarian-ruled countries, such as Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran (BAMF 2024, 8), the course is the primary, if not the only, offer for political education for individuals who have never lived in a democracy.

Although the course aims to provide an understanding of democracy, its institutions, and its values, I argue that neither its structure nor its curriculum effectively fosters democratic competencies such as comprehension, critical reflection, or participation. Therefore, this article aims to examine the values and competencies necessary for individuals in democratic societies and how Germany's orientation course contributes to their development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, there has been limited research in the social sciences on the effects of integration courses in Germany (Lutterbach & Beelmann 2022, 365). The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) itself is responsible for the majority of publications on the topic.

Their most recent evaluation of the orientation course concluded that most participants primarily focused on studying for the final test, showing little interest in the course content itself (Kay et al., 2023, p. 18). Additionally, teachers highlighted the challenges in managing conflicts when discussing democratic values such as equality for all genders, religions, nationalities, and sexual orientations (Kay et al. 2023, 18). Lastly, the challenge of language abilities is mentioned in the context of some participants being unable to follow the courses due to insufficient German skills (Kay et al. 2023, 18).

Lutterbach and Beelmann (2022) utilized data from the Thuringia Monitor Integration, which surveyed 906 refugees regarding their political and ideological beliefs, to investigate whether participation in an integration course affected their support for democratic values and institutions. They concluded that the courses had a minimal effect, with the only significant improvements being an increase in institutional trust and support for constitutional freedoms, such as the right to demonstrate, free speech, and a free press. However, the course did not lead to any change in support for violence as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts (Lutterbach & Beelmann 2022, 374).

This confirms international research on immigrants from authoritarian countries and their views on democracy. While support for democracy is often high (especially the trust in institutions), it is mostly associated with material benefits such as wealth, safety and new perspectives (Müssig 2021, 132; Neu 2022, 2; Dollmann 2021, 1097, 1112; Bilodeau 2012, 361).

Despite the general support for democracy, it is also evident that, compared to immigrants from democratic countries, there is significantly higher support for authoritarian leadership and less tolerance for different social groups (Bilodeau 2012, 360, 366-368; Röder& Mühlau 2012, 790; Janmaat 2008, 31-37; Neu 2022, 4-10). It can, therefore, be argued that education aimed at fostering democratic values and competencies, as well as encouraging reflection on authoritarian ideas, should be prioritized.

METHODS

To address the question of what an offer of political education should and can achieve, this study adopts a two-step approach.

First, it outlines the key democratic values and competencies by drawing on relevant insights from democratic theory. This theoretical framework provides the normative basis for evaluating political education initiatives.

Second, the study examines the legal framework, curriculum, and two officially approved teaching materials used in the orientation course. By analyzing these components concerning the identified democratic values and competencies, the study assesses how effectively they align and contribute to the promotion of democratic education objectives.

DEMOCRATIC VALUES AND COMPETENCIES

Over the past few decades, many political and social scientists have used Almond and Verba's study as a foundation to substantiate the qualities required for someone to be considered democratic. However, for this article, it is essential to note that when discussing democratic citizens, the focus is specifically on citizens. Most studies theorize about people who have full access to civil rights and political participation. This is not the case for the group of people who participate in the orientation courses as refugees from authoritarian countries because they are usually not citizens of Germany or any other country of the EU and, therefore, cannot participate in democratic procedures such as elections (Article 28 GG). Hence, competencies like "political efficacy," which refers to the feeling of being able to influence politics (Verba et al. 1995, 272), must be excluded from this definition.

Additionally, it is crucial to acknowledge that the statements concerning democratic culture delineate a theoretically formulated ideal. This is not to imply that citizens who have been raised in democracies inherently embody this ideal.

The existing literature on democratic values and competencies will be summarized in the following.

Diffuse Democratic Support

Especially, David Easton has emphasized the importance of diffuse democratic support, which he describes as a general trust in democracy and its institutions that is difficult to define or explain (Easton 1975, 444). From this diffuse support stems the internalization and appreciation of principles of liberal democracies, such as free and fair elections and the federal protection of people's freedom and equality (Schmidt 2019, 385; Schmitz-Vardar 2024, 67). Furthermore, it entails the clear rejection of authoritarian rule or elements of such (Norris 2011, 24). This may also include support for democratic regimes and their forces, as democracy relies on society's acceptance of the authorities within a state (Pickel & Pickel 2006, 65). However, people need to appreciate their freedoms and autonomy and should resist a high degree of paternalism (Schmidt 2019, 385). This once again highlights the importance for every democratic person to value and respect, above all, the key democratic values of equality and freedom for everyone (Welzel & Alvarez 2015, 60).

According to Easton (1975), diffuse support has a stabilizing effect on democracy as a whole, fostering individuals' trust in political institutions and their identification with a political community (Easton 1975, 447). Somewhat less significant yet still important, he describes the need for specific democratic support, which he defines as approval of current political decisions and players (Easton 1975, 437). This is closely linked to the competencies listed in the following sections.

Knowledge

Certainly, while knowledge primarily serves the democratic citizen by enabling mindful participation—which, as previously mentioned, is often less of an option for participants in integration courses—it can be argued that democracy requires an informed populace (van Deth 2000, 117). Information about the country's people, history, and political system, as well as its position in the world, key figures, and power structures, plays a significant role in democracy (Almond & Verba 1972, 16). In addition, Kirlin (2002) argues for the importance of differentiating between the public, non-profit, and private sectors, as well as the importance of conscientious selection and reception of news (Kirlin 2002, 574). Liberal representative democracies also demand knowledge about the relevant political parties and their agendas, as well as general factors and more current affairs, such as how these parties plan to address specific challenges (Kruse 2024, 236).

Critical Thinking, Judgement for Action, and Partisanship

Knowledge of facts alone is insufficient for democracy. It also requires critical reflection on these facts and the ability to make an informed and reflective judgment. This includes the ability to switch perspectives, understanding that politicians, as well as others, may try to present themselves in a different light to gain supporters (Almond & Verba 1972, 16; Kirlin 2002, 574; Detjen et al. 2012, 40), and recognizing the potential effects of certain political measures (Kruse 2024, 239; Detjen et al. 2012, 41). While this may be more relevant when deciding how to vote or which political party to support, it might be less significant for individuals who do not have voting rights. Nevertheless, there may still be informal options for political participation. For example, refugees may still join organizations affiliated with certain political parties and participate less formally.

In addition to that, partisanship is important in a functioning democracy, not only to choose a party to support in an election but also because it shows involvement, an absence of indifference as well as the ability to connect politics with one's own daily life (Almond& Verba 1972, 31; Barber 2003, 133).

Tolerance for Ambiguity and Uncertainty

In a modern world of globalization, digitalization, and environmental and social crises, societies are becoming more heterogeneous, and political problems are becoming more complex. It is hence determined that in democracies that rely on cooperation and consensus, people need the ability to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty (Bellmer & Möller 2023, 56; Kruse,

2024, 243). As the promise of simple solutions and certain outcomes for political measures becomes a hallmark of autocratic rule, the urge to categorize matters into black-and-white schemes of good and bad, right and wrong, without acknowledging complexity, becomes counterproductive (Frenkel-Brunswick 1949, 115-116; Kruse 2024, 245). Only in the acceptance of complexity and uncertainty, as well as dynamic and conflicting interpretations, lies the tolerance needed for a democratic community (Kruse 2024, 245).

The Capability to Resolve Conflict Through Discussion, Consensus, and Cooperation

This leads to the next essential competence, which is the ability and willingness to cooperate and resolve conflicts through discussion in order to work towards a consensus that all involved parties can live with (Almond & Verba 1972, 490; Kruse 2024, 231). Almond and Verba named "faith in people" as a necessity to develop such capabilities. They point out that democracy needs conflicting opinions, for without a choice between alternatives, there can be no democracy. However, this conflict must always be balanced by social trust for a society to function effectively (Almond & Verba 1972, 490).

Many theorists of democracy, such as Robert Dahl (1992, 53) and Benjamin Barber (2003, 133), have argued that democratic engagement is fundamentally expressed through deliberation, which simultaneously cultivates the capacity for democratic behavior. What Almond and Verba described as "faith in people" is further developed by Barber (2003, 170) as the ability to adopt another person's perspective and to act with empathy. In this context, conflict is not eliminated but transformed into cooperation through deliberative processes (Barber 2003, 135).

Identification with a Political Community and Balancing Individual and Collective Interests

This leads to a final necessity in a democratic culture, namely, the individual's connection to the political community. It has often been argued that a democracy cannot function without interconnected people because solidarity and a shared interest in the common good are essential for democratic participation (Verba et al. 1995, 272; Putnam & Gross 2001, 15-17). The democratic principles of popular sovereignty, as well as the acceptance of all people as free and equal, must be upheld by a society united by shared values (Schlenker-Fischer 2009, 12). Pluralism complicates this goal, but democracies may still hope for some universal values that can nonetheless be agreed upon. While the necessity for faith in people has already been mentioned above, it shall be added that democracy also needs an understanding of individuals that their lives are intertwined and that they must, therefore, consider the interests of the community as well as their own for otherwise there can be no ground for cooperation (Pateman 1985, 24).

PURPOSE OF THE ORIENTATION COURSE

The legally defined purpose of the orientation course as an integral part of the integration course is to facilitate knowledge of the legal order, German culture and history, and especially the values of the German democratic state system as well as the principles of the rule of law, including equal rights, tolerance, and freedom of religion (§ 3 IntV – Ordinance on Integration Courses). The curriculum of the orientation course substantiates that even further and more ambitious with the aim to create an understanding of the German political system, the development of a positive evaluation of the German state, the establishment of knowledge on rights and duties of German residents and citizens as well as competences to orient oneself in Germany further and to participate in German society whilst acquiring intercultural competence (BAMF 2017, 7).

These aims share many reference points with the previously examined values and competencies for democracies.

The first three points encompass both the competence of knowledge and diffuse support. The furthering of orientation and participation in German society, while being much more abstract, clearly implies the competence to gather and evaluate more information on one's own. This can be linked to the ability to critically reflect and judge in order to act in an informed and autonomous manner. While tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty are not mentioned as goals of the curriculum, the ability to cooperate, solve a conflict by discussion and consensus, and identification or integration into the political community or society appears to be included in the term of knowing the legal system as well as rights and duties, the intercultural competence and of course the further integration into German society.

Concerning diffuse support, Easton (1975, 445) assumes that it is fostered by socialization as well as experience. It cannot, therefore, be expected of a course to teach this support. Then again, the diffuse support among immigrants from authoritarian countries appears at least partially established when examining the research cited above.

The connection to a political community should also be difficult to foster in the setting of an orientation course, for it is dependent on a commitment by civic society. Teachers might build connections or inform about organizations where participants can encounter Germans, but this would be a one-sided intervention where both sides need to make an effort. Additionally, many participants are constrained by their legal status, as will be elaborated upon later.

Whether the remaining goals can be achieved in the course will be analyzed through a closer examination of the course and its contents. Before we examine how the course further develops these abilities, there will first be some information on the course's conditions.

An Overview of the History and Legal Framework of the Integration Course

The legal foundation for integration courses can be found in Section 3 of the Residence Act (AufenthG). Its development was part of the 2005 Immigration Act, which, for the first time in German history, defined the integration of immigrants as a state obligation (Endres de Oliveira & Naghipour 2025, note 1 on § 43). While there is no legal definition of the word integration, it can be seen from the context that its legal understanding mainly focuses on German language skills, basic knowledge of the German legal system and culture, economic

independence from state benefits and not posing a threat to public order and security (Eichenhofer 2025, note 1101 on AufenthG).

The integration courses are primarily funded by the state and are usually free of charge for refugees as long as they receive basic social security benefits (Eichenhofer 2025, note 1110 on §§ 43-44a AufenthG). The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) certifies and oversees the organizing institutions for the courses and the mandatory tests at the end of the language and orientation courses (Schroeder & Zakharova 2015, 258).

Regarding the language course (integration course modules 1-6), the legal goal is to achieve a B1 level, as outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (§ 3 IntV). The orientation course (integration course, Module 7) focuses on teaching basic knowledge of German law, culture, history, and, in particular, democratic values, as well as an understanding of the German political system (§ 3 I 2 IntV). Qualification requirements for teachers primarily concern degrees for German teachers, as specified in German law (§ 15 IntV).

The Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) must approve the teaching materials for integration courses (Schroeder & Zakharova 2015, 258).

The Participants

Immigrants with a permanent permit to reside in Germany and a first residence permit for work, family reunification, humanitarian reasons, or a long-term residence permit have the right to participate in an integration course (§ 44 AufenthG), following the prohibition of discrimination in Article 18 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union that also includes EU-citizens (Endres de Oliveira & Naghipour 2025, note 4 on § 44 AufenthG).

Statistics on participants in integration courses, sorted by country of origin, show that while the courses are open to a large number of immigrants, the majority appear to be living in Germany for humanitarian reasons (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants in Integration Courses, Sorted by Country of Origin (Source: BAMF 2024, 8)

Country of Citizenship	Total number	Percentage
Ukraine	117.382	32,3 %
Syria	57.442	15,8 %
Afghanistan	30.840	8,5 %
Turkey	25.618	7,0 %
Iraq	8.236	2,3 %
Iran	7.840	2,2 %

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, a large number of participants have come from Ukraine. However, a significant number originate from authoritarian-ruled countries like Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq (BAMF 2024, 8).

This development, in which participants are now mainly refugees, led to an expansion of the orientation course in 2017, which formerly consisted of only 60 teaching units. Additionally, the curriculum was modified to focus more on constitutional principles and democratic values, including gender equality and religious tolerance (Lutterbach & Beelmann 2022, 368).

The focus of this article is on refugees from authoritarian countries, which is why their legal situation warrants further elaboration.

After refugees have been granted a residence permit, they are typically entitled to basic security benefits for job seekers (SGB II) and participation in an integration course (BMAS 2025).

Like the SGB II, the state integration support follows the two principles of support and demand ("Fördern und Fordern" - § 43 I AufenthG), which means that in return for the financing of basic needs, integration and job counseling as well as learning opportunities like language courses, the law demands that immigrants actively work on their integration (Endres de Oliveira & Naghipour 2025, note 1 on § 43 AufenthG). Integration is herein defined as the insertion into German economic, cultural, and social life (Röcker 2022, on § 43 AufenthG).

A key element in enforcing the demand part of this concept is the reliance on sanctions in case recipients do not comply with the directions given by the involved public authorities. Non-compliance can lead to cutbacks on basic security benefits (§ 31a SGB II) and, in some cases, even negatively influence the decision on a residence permit (Hadamitzky & Senge 2024, 126).

The Curriculum

Ambitiously, the curriculum states that considering the experiences participants have had in Germany, the course is intended not only to illustrate the meaning of democracy and constitutional rights for a self-determined life, as well as constructive cooperation, but also to enable them to experience it firsthand. The amount of discourse is supposed to be increased, whilst always drawing a clear line of where personal freedoms end. Experiences of daily situations, as well as conflicts, are to be examined from different perspectives so that participants may reevaluate their former views and positions (BAMF 2017, 13). All of this should occur under the principles of the Beutelsbacher consensus, a concept for teaching political education that prohibits indoctrination, encourages discussion on controversies and helps students analyze their interests and find ways to translate them into political action (BAMF 2017, 14). Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to connect the course topics with current regional developments and provide examples of public discourse on matters that participants can relate to (BAMF 2017, 14).

Some of the curriculum's requirements address the participants themselves, who are expected to understand German at an A2 level, possess prior knowledge of the topics, be able to study independently and be willing to contribute to the course through active participation (BAMF 2017, 19).

The curriculum outlines numerous guidelines for both teachers and students (BAMF 2017, 16-19). The teachers of these courses are mainly German language teachers, as also noted in the curriculum. It, therefore, offers advanced training as part of its program. It is worth noting that the majority of teachers in integration courses are not employees but rather work as freelancers, a condition that the labor union for education and science has criticized for their low wages and uncertain employment status (GEW 2023). It could be argued that such working conditions provide little motivation or resources for teachers to go beyond their responsibilities.

The next step will be an examination of two BAMF-approved textbooks for orientation courses to assess the materials provided to teachers and students in fulfillment of these demanding guidelines.

Textbooks for the Orientation Course

For this article, the following two approved textbooks have been examined:

- Buchwald-Wargenau, Isabel. 2022. Mein Leben in Deutschland. Der Orientierungskurs – Basiswissen Politik, Geschichte, Gesellschaft. 2nd Edition. München: Hueber Verlag.
- Schote, Joachim. 2024. Orientierungskurs. Grundwissen Politik, Geschichte und Gesellschaft in Deutschland. Vorbereitung auf den Test Leben in Deutschland. 1st Edition. Berlin: Cornelsen Verlag.

The books open with an overview of what politics in a democracy entails. While Buchwald-Wargenau begins with a prompt to discuss this question, Schote starts with a chapter on the essential elements of democracy and its institutions (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 13; Schote 2024, 10). Both books recite some of the constitutional rights in Germany. This is done by quoting legal paragraphs on human dignity, the right to live and physical integrity, equality of all people and genders, freedom of expression, religion, press and movement, as well as the four basic principles of the organization of the state which constitute that Germany is a federal republic, a democracy under the rule of law and a welfare state. All of these are explained in the context of interviews, quotes, right or wrong questions, and examples of violations (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 14-23; Schote 2024, 12-17). They introduce symbols of the state, such as the German flag and the national anthem, and further elaborate on what federalism means, what a welfare state entails, and the rights and duties of residents in Germany (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 22-34; Schote 2024, 18-25, 30-35). Constitutional bodies, such as the Bundestag (German parliament) and the Federal Constitutional Court, are explained (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 36-39; Schote 2024, 20-22). Schote (2024, 18-25) focuses the exercises on tasks such as summarizing texts in one's own words, matching texts and pictures, examples, or summaries, and reports on the situation in the country of origin or experiences in Germany. Buchwald-Wargenau (2022, 23) does that, too, but inserts more questions to trigger reflection, such as asking participants to name the visibility of democracy in their daily lives. Essentially, the only information available on current politics is the introduction of political parties and figures in the Bundestag (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 39; Schote 2024, 26).

The first chapters conclude by presenting forms of participation through voting, volunteering, or the activities of NGOs, such as labor unions or Greenpeace (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 44-48; Schote 2024, 28, 34-37).

The second chapter focuses on German history, specifically the period since 1933. By providing basic information about the Hitler regime and its numerous crimes, both books offer a rather superficial foundation for reflection, which they attempt to stimulate through the question of what can be learned from this history (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 51-56; Schote 2024, 42-47). What follows are explanations of the division and reunification of eastern and western Germany, as well as the consequences that can still be seen today. Interestingly, this

part is mainly input-oriented and provides little to no tasks for reflection or discussion (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 58-62; Schote 2024, 49-54).

Both conclude with an explanation of the EU and Germany's role in it, leading to the question of what participants think of the EU (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 64-68; Schote 2024, 56-61).

Under the headline "Human and Society," the third chapter tries to capture German culture. Buchwald-Wargenau (2022, 71) begins by defining tolerance and an exercise to reflect on it. Schote (2024, 66-69) begins with a reflection on what is important to people in Germany and to participants, as well as the experience of arriving in and getting accustomed to Germany. Both books then cover the topics of family, leading to equality among men and women, as well as the education of children (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 72-86; Schote 2024, 70-78), and lifelong learning (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 86; Schote 2024, 80). They then turn to further deepen their understanding of democratic values by discussing tolerance, different cultures and lifestyles, religious diversity, and how to solve conflicts peacefully (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 88-102; Schote 2024, 83-92).

RESULTS

The first chapters encompass a vast amount of complex information, which is intended to be covered in 35 teaching units (typically 20 teaching units per week), including a field trip (BAMF 2017, 24). While Buchwald-Wargenau includes some exercises for reflection, most exercises in both books are mainly the reproduction of information given in the texts. Notably, the language used is also very complex. This is reflected in the course evaluation, which found that many participants struggle to follow due to insufficient language skills (Kay et al. 2023, 18). Quite clearly, both books place much responsibility on the teachers of the courses, as apart from the fact that the book cannot facilitate discussion and probably not even reflection, there is no information on local or current politics. Hence, teachers of the courses are obliged to continuously stay informed on such matters to pass that information on.

Both books do rather little to utilize the historical summary as examples from which to understand better what democracy is and why it was established in Germany in the way it is found today. Whilst knowledge acquisition seems to be the main goal, reflective parts fall rather short.

Both books use images and texts—such as interviews and newspaper articles—as starting points for discussion. They ask participants to share and compare their own experiences in Germany and elsewhere. Naturally, some exercises serve only to enhance understanding and the acquisition of new German expressions, but some test democratic skills. Both books, for example, offer an exercise where participants are supposed to find a solution to a described conflict (Buchwald-Wargenau 2022, 95; Schote 2024, 86). In both books, the last chapter attempts to capture an essential aspect of democratic competence. The emphasis on equality between men and women, as well as religious tolerance, reflects the changes implemented in 2017, as mentioned earlier.

Both books thoroughly cover the curriculum topics required for course approval and address all the democratic competencies mentioned. They offer rich content, emphasizing tolerance—especially when engaging with differing perspectives—and pose reflective questions

that foster critical thinking, judgment, and responsible partisanship. Additionally, they offer concrete opportunities to practice peaceful conflict resolution and provide information on organizations that participants can join to integrate into German communities. Managing all that on about a hundred pages is rather impressive, and yet the question remains: does it make a difference?

DISCUSSION

Initially, the conclusions of Lutterbach and Beelmann, who found little significant change in attitudes with or without the orientation course, were summarized (Lutterbach & Beelmann 2022, 374). This hardly comes as a surprise to Almond and Verba, who knew over 70 years ago that political education alone cannot create or change a political culture. They assumed then that individuals learn about democracy through political experiences and socialization (Almond & Verba 1972, 499).

As mentioned earlier, a significant amount of responsibility is placed on teachers by the curriculum, as well as the examined books. It has been explained that teachers are usually not professionals in teaching political education but rather in language education, and that most work as freelancers. It could, therefore, be argued that better working conditions, such as higher pay or proper employment, would provide stronger grounds to ensure better utilization of advanced training and increased motivation to meet the demands of this challenging job.

It is also worth considering that a multiple-choice test at the end of the course may not be the ideal way to conclude the course, as the evaluation revealed that many students focus solely on studying for the test questions (Kay et al. 2023, 18).

In addition, it might also be necessary to reflect on the curriculum itself. If we examine the curriculum and the textbooks, some parts suggest that participants need to be taught specific things. The revised version of the course was attributed to a shift in participants, indicating that it is now primarily taken by refugees (Lutterbach & Beelmann 2022, 364). The new focus on gender equality and tolerance for other religions implies that these are things that refugees know little about, and the teaching materials deal with that in a bit of a paternalistic way. In this very private area, the course instructs participants on how things are done in Germany, and it is more than implied that this is the right way.

The deeply rooted and very private ideas of family and faith will hardly be influenced by a couple of hours of input on how this is to be practiced. The discussion of these personal subjects might also cause heavy conflict in these very heterogeneous courses, which could overstrain the facilitating skills of teachers. It might be helpful to standardize the inclusion of speakers from outside the course who deal with such matters professionally. This might be the case in some orientation courses, but it could be included in the curriculum.

If we look beyond the course setting, it is essential to recognize that the participants' general legal situation—particularly that of refugees—has a significant impact on their motivation to participate. Although they may be interested in the course content, their participation is not always entirely voluntary but often mandated by assignment (§ 44a AufenthG).

The values of freedom, equality, and, above all, self-determination can be studied in the course; however, the question remains how they can be internalized when participants experience a high amount of paternalism and dependence in their day-to-day lives.

CONCLUSION

Naturally, a course of 100 teaching units, typically spanning five weeks, cannot adequately manage the complex process of internalizing a democratic culture. This analysis has shown, however, that there are ways to improve the effects of the course for its participants by softening the element of force and paternalism and, above all, finding ways to describe very complex subjects like human dignity in words that can be comprehended by people who have only been studying German for some months. From a teacher's perspective, creating better working conditions and further qualification in political education, as well as skills for moderating potentially very emotional debates, can be recommended in order to raise professional standards. On an organizational level, this could be achieved by reflecting on different forms of tests to complete the course and establishing standardized procedures for inviting experts (for example, on different religions and cultures) to diversify the teaching staff and help facilitate difficult topics that might lead to heavy discussions.

The orientation course is only the last course module of the integration course, which focuses mainly on language acquisition. It is the author's opinion that state-financed language and culture courses for immigrants and refugees are a key element of successful integration. The positive effects of participation in an integration course on integration into the labor market have been demonstrated through empirical evidence (Brücker et al. 2024, 1). It is, however, also the author's opinion that neither language nor political culture can be learned in a classroom alone and that a full-time course that prevents its participants from work, internships or other activities that could lead to much more contact with other people living in Germany might be counterproductive. A more flexible part-time language course, as is offered in Norway, for example (Kosyakova et al. 2024, 59), might be more effective in internalizing the German language and culture.

In a globalized world, people with very different values and beliefs have to come together and manage to form political communities, as solidarity is an important part of democracy. Establishing a democratic culture is very difficult, as can be seen by the prevalence of anti-democratic developments all over the world, even in countries where students learn about these topics for many years. However, learning democracy needs more than theoretical knowledge. It needs democratic structures and practices that make a self-determined life possible.

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