

Press release

Brussels/Hanover, 21 November 2024

Shaping the Future of Rural Europe: Small and Medium-Sized Towns in Focus***The ARL Brussels Talk focuses on the future direction of European funding programs***

Small and medium-sized towns are of central importance to the development of rural regions. At the invitation of the Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz-Association (ARL), around 30 guests gathered at the Lower Saxony State Representation in Brussels on Wednesday to take part in the ARL Brussels Talk. The event offered insights into past achievements and future challenges from both scientific and political perspectives. A key focus was on the potential realignment of EU funding policies currently under discussion for 2028 and its implications for strengthening rural areas in Lower Saxony through European funding programs.

In his opening remarks, **Michael Freericks, Head of the Representation of the State of Lower Saxony to the EU**, emphasized the strategic importance of European funding programs for the resilience of rural areas. Drawing on resources from the Cohesion Policy and the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD), Lower Saxony benefits from a versatile toolkit, including initiatives like “Village Regions” (=Dorfreigionen), LEADER, “Future Regions” (=Zukunftsregionen), and “Resilient City Centres” (=Resiliente Innenstädte). State programs such as *Future Spaces of Lower Saxony* and *Regional Supply Centers* complement these efforts. “It is only with EU funding that we can offer this toolkit, tailored to various regional types, and create vital opportunities for small and medium-sized towns,” Freericks stated. He also cautioned against proposals from the European Commission to consolidate all EU-level funding into a single fund, warning that such a move, along with potential budget cuts, could undermine key pillars of quality of life, competitiveness, and public services in rural areas.

ARL President Prof. Dr. Axel Priebs highlighted the role of small and medium-sized towns as supply centres. Due to their vital importance to citizens' quality of life, these towns hold a prominent place in the ARL's scientific work and policy advisory activities. Programs like “Future Spaces of Lower Saxony” (=Zukunftsräume Niedersachsen) and “Regional Care Centres” (=Regionale Versorgungszentren) bolster municipalities through flexible tools for regional development and support the consolidation of essential services in the lower-order and middle-order centres identified in state and regional planning,” Prieb said, commending the initiatives launched by Lower Saxony. He noted with satisfaction that the Future Spaces program originated from recommendations made by the “Future Forum of Lower Saxony” (=Zukunftsforum Niedersachsen), a state government initiative in which he and another ARL expert had played a role.

Dr. Annett Steinführer from the Thünen Institute of Rural Studies and Dr. Martin Sondermann, head of the ARL's Academic Section for Society and Culture, explored the critical role of small and medium-sized towns in rural development and public service provision from a scientific perspective. “The significance of small towns as essential service hubs anchoring rural areas is still underestimated and needs to be re-evaluated on a European scale,” said Steinführer. These towns, she explained, are fundamental to maintaining public and private services for surrounding rural regions in the long term. This role can be sustained and enhanced through targeted funding. This applies not only to Germany but to all of Europe.



Mathias Dingerdissen, a representative from the Lower Saxony Ministry for Federal and European Affairs and Regional Development, provided deeper insights into the state programs “Future Spaces of Lower Saxony” and “Regional Care Centres”. These approaches, he argued, have the potential to inspire similar developments in other rural areas across Europe. “By funding Regional Care Centres, the state gives municipalities the autonomy to address critical future issues. Meanwhile, the Future Spaces program targets small and medium-sized towns in Lower Saxony that play a crucial role as service hubs for their surrounding areas, strengthening their anchoring function,” Dingerdissen stated. “These programs establish new funding priorities and have proven to be successful models, enabling municipalities to implement strategic projects for local public services.”

The event concluded with a panel discussion moderated by **Hendrik Kafsack, EU correspondent for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (F.A.Z.)*** where the importance of small and medium-sized towns for rural areas was emphasised at European level. The panel reaffirmed the need for stable and long-term EU funding in order to further strengthen Europe’s regions in all their facets and to sustainably secure public service provision and quality of life.

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Panel discussion; f.l.t.r. Hendrik Kafsack, Axel Priebes, Mathias Dingerdissen, Martin Sondermann and Annett Steinführer; © ARL/Britta Bockhorn