

28 March 2026

BANS ON GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN GERMANY AND SWITZERLAND

FROM STATE POLICIES TO LOCAL PRACTICE

Dr. Aline Siegenthaler (sie/ihr)

University of Fribourg, CH

aline.siegenthaler@unifr.ch

Samira Ochs (sie/ihr)

Leibniz-Institute for the German Language (IDS) Mannheim, DE

ochs@ids-mannheim.de

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BANS IN GERMANY

1.2 BANS IN SWITZERLAND

2. GUIDELINES

2.1 CORPUS AND METHOD

2.2 RESULTS

3. CITY WEBSITES

3.1 CORPUS AND METHOD

3.2 RESULTS

5. CONCLUSION

Focus on non-binary gender symbols, e. g. the gender star
(*die Lehrer*innen*)

INTRODUCTION: BANS IN GERMANY

Federal State	Effective Date	Issued By	Affected Areas	Regulated / Prohibited Forms of Gender-Inclusive Language
Bavaria	April 1, 2024	Markus Söder (CSU), Joachim Herrmann (CSU)	Public authorities, schools, university administration (not teaching/research)	Non-binary special characters prohibited (e.g., gender asterisk *, colon :, underscore _); Reason: official orthographic regulations (Amtliches Regelwerk)
Brandenburg	October 2023	BVB / Free Voters (proposal & implementation via Ministry of Education)	Schools, universities, public administration	Non-binary special characters prohibited and classified as errors (no grading penalty)
Hesse	April 9, 2024	Boris Rhein (CDU), Armin Schwarz (CDU), Timon Gremmels (SPD)	State administration, schools, university administration (not teaching/research)	Non-binary special characters prohibited and classified as errors (can lead to point deductions)
Rhineland- Palatinate	September 7, 2023	Stefanie Hubig (SPD)	Schools	Non-binary special characters prohibited and classified as errors (no grading penalty)
Saxony	July 6, 2023	Christian Piwarz (CDU)	Administration, schools, university administration (not teaching/research), ministry-affiliated organizations	Non-binary special characters prohibited while allowing standard-compliant alternatives (e.g., slash forms) Reason: official orthographic regulations (Amtliches Regelwerk)
Saxony- Anhalt	August 2023	Eva Feußner (CDU)	Official communication, school instruction	Non-binary special characters prohibited and classified as errors (no grading penalty)
Schleswig- Holstein	September 9, 2021	Karin Prien (CDU)	Schools	Non-binary special characters prohibited (disciplinary consequences for teachers are possible) Reason: official orthographic regulations (Amtliches Regelwerk)

INTRODUCTION: BANS IN SWITZERLAND

- In Switzerland, the federal chancellery issued a statement in 2021 prohibiting the use of non-binary gender symbols (such as star, underscore and colon) in federal administration (Schweizerische Bundeskanzlei 2021)
- Even though the chancellery recognizes that non-binary people are less represented in language and it supports the general idea to include all people, it is then postulated that the non-binary gender symbols are unsuitable to accomplish this for different linguistic, politic and legal reasons.
- That statement is reinforced in their guideline (Schweizerische Bundeskanzlei 2023)

GUIDELINES: CORPUS AND METHOD

Corpus 1: Guidelines for inclusive language

- Based on the corpus from my thesis (Siegenthaler 2024), that used an existing collection of guidelines; the corpus was then updated in November 2025 with newly published guidelines
- The following guidelines were included: Guidelines from Swiss cities (9 in total) and guidelines from German cities where gender bans are in place (17 in total)
- Total number: 26 guidelines, of which 13 that overlap with the newly collected data on city websites
- The guidelines were published after 2018, but not all of them after the bans, as it takes some time until these changes are reflected
- Nevertheless, the overall results as well as more specifically the recommendations in the guidelines that can be observed after the implementation of the bans permit to get an overall image of the reactions that are possible when such bans are put in place

RESULTS: GUIDELINES OVERALL

- Overall, **22 of the 26 guidelines** that were analysed recommend at least one of the non-binary gender symbols (**85 %**)
- The **gender star** is the **most recommended** symbol (**5** of the 7 Swiss guidelines and **13** of the 15 German guidelines that recommend non-binary gender symbols)
- The **colon** and the **underscore** are recommended in **5** and **4** guidelines respectively
- **Swiss cities** generally only recommend **one form** and not a choice between the **different symbols**, while a few **German cities allow a choice**
- In guidelines from **Germany**, the decision to **include non-binary gender symbols** is in general supported by the **addition of a third gender category** ('divers') to the civil registry in 2017 ('Dritte Geschlechtsoption'), even though this option is **not intended for non-binary people**.

RESULTS: GUIDELINES AFTER BANS

Case number 1: Compliance

- The city guidelines comply fully with the bans/official recommendations

Example: “Against this backdrop, the Council [Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung] did not recommend the inclusion of the asterisk (‘gender star’), underscore (‘gender gap’), colon [...] within words in the Official Rules of German Spelling (...). In July 2023, the Free State of Saxony once again clarified and tightened its stance on the use of gender-neutral language in schools. Gender-neutral spellings using special characters are not permitted in Saxony’s schools. (City of Leipzig 2023: 3)

- Here, it is argued that based on two official decisions (from the *Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung* and the gender symbol bans in Saxony), different non-binary gender symbols can’t be used
- Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the city of Leipzig never recommended non-binary gender symbols; they just add the new rule to their argumentation without changing their recommendations

RESULTS: GUIDELINES AFTER BANS

Case number 2: Differentiation

- The guidelines differentiate between different text types or target groups

Example: “The City of Nuremberg avoids the use of such special characters in its communications. SOLE EXCEPTION: The GENDER STAR* may be used to address specific target groups. The gender star is inserted between the feminine and masculine word endings.” (City of Nuremberg 2024: 12, my emphasis)

- Differentiation is not solely limited to guidelines from places where gender bans are in place: It is a strategy often used in guidelines in order to show which of the numerous gender-inclusive forms can be used for which purpose and which contexts (see Siegenthaler 2024)

RESULTS: SWISS GUIDELINES

Case number 2: Differentiation

- Differentiation is very present in the Swiss guidelines: Six of the seven guidelines that recommend non-binary gender symbols indicate in which text types they can't be used (or list exceptions where they can be used)
- Non-binary gender symbols are usually not intended to be used in legal texts and other texts with a more official status, for which the official guidelines from the Federal chancellery are respected

Examples:

“The gender star is not permitted in the following documents: official collections, rulings, submissions to courts and appellate bodies, as well as motions to the city council, the municipal council, and voters, and press releases.” (City of Uster 2023: 3, my emphasis)

“Exceptions include texts in advertisements, social media posts, and tables. In these cases, the gender colon may be used to save space.” (City of Frauenfeld 2022: 6, my emphasis)

RESULTS: GUIDELINES AFTER BANS

Case number 3: Non-compliance

- The guidelines specifically go against gender bans

Example: “As the administration of the city of Aschaffenburg, we place great value on equality and equity, which we advocate for, among other things, through gender-sensitive language. Due to the principle of local self-government, we as the Aschaffenburg city administration are not affected by the so-called “gender ban” of the Bavarian state government and the associated amendment to the General Rules of Procedure of the Free State of Bavaria. The ban applies exclusively to state authorities and schools.” (City of Aschaffenburg 2024: 4)

- The guideline further states that, by including the gender star, they are “meeting the Bavarian State Ministry’s requirement to linguistically represent all genders.” (p. 6), which shows that different legal bases can be used to argument for one or the other form
- This approach is less common

RESULTS: GUIDELINES AFTER BANS

In terms of changes after the bans, we can thus see three different possible directions:

1. Compliance in all documents (likely more so if the city administration already had a negative stance towards non-binary gender symbols or just didn't include these symbols in their guideline), e. g. Leipzig (2023), Schaffhausen (2022)
2. Differentiation (different forms for different texts and different target groups, something we already see a lot in Swiss cities), e. g. Uster (2023), Winterthur (2024), Nürnberg (2024)
3. Non-compliance through explicit rejection of the gender bans and continued use of non-binary gender symbols, e. g. Aschaffenburg (2024)

CORPUS & METHOD: CITY WEBSITES

- Change-of-address sites & job ads
- Germany, Austria, Switzerland, South Tyrol → 42 cities
- manual annotation of all personal nouns (generic masculine, pair forms, gender symbols, neutralizations)
- first analyses for 2022:

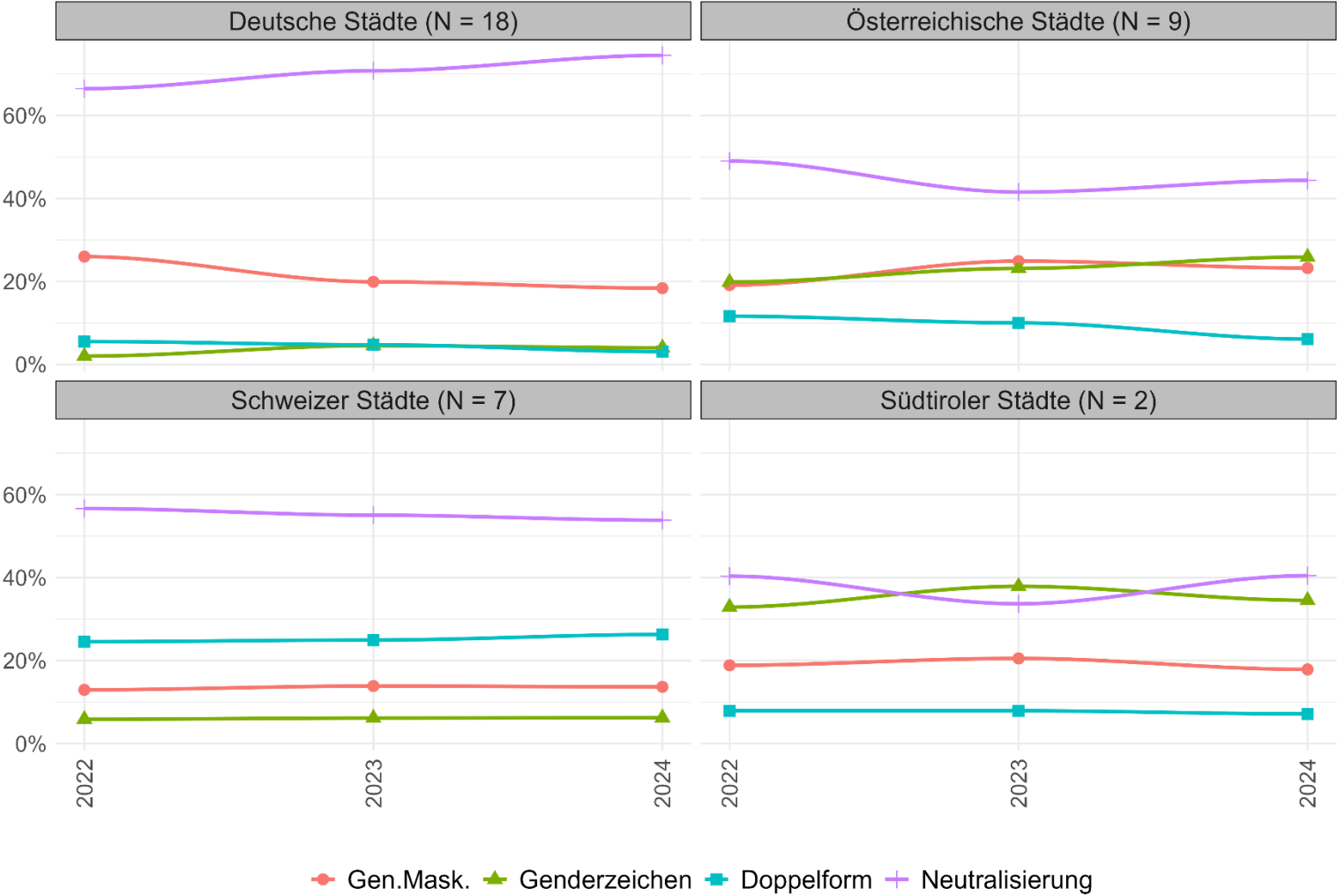
Müller-Spitzer, Carolin/Ochs, Samira (2023): Geschlechtergerechte Sprache auf den Webseiten deutscher, österreichischer, schweizerischer und Südtiroler Städte. In: Sprachreport 39(2), S. 1–5. https://doi.org/10.14618/sr-2-2023_mue.

→ we already saw **differences between text types and countries**

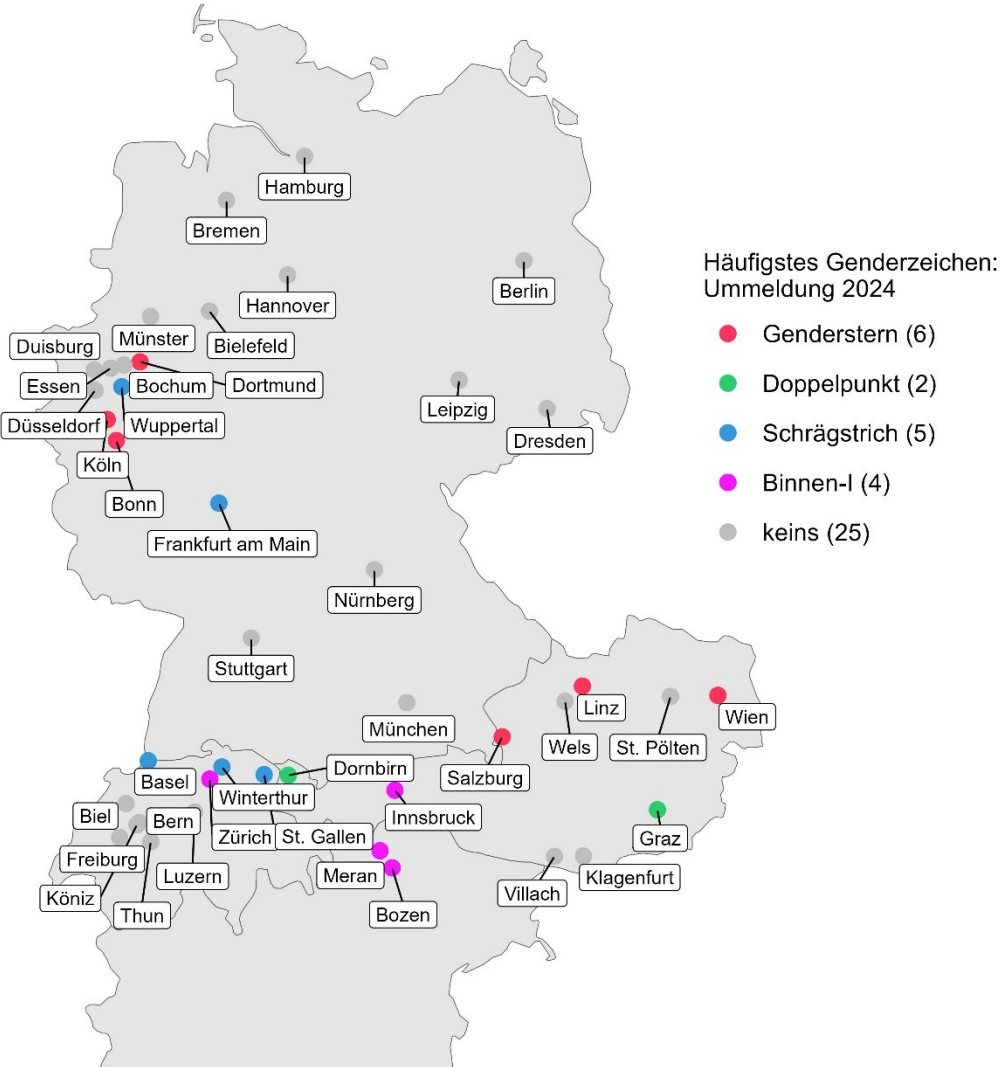
- more detailed analyses in micro-diachrony (2022-2024):

Ochs, Samira/Manara, Melissa/Müller-Spitzer, Carolin (2026): Die Verwendung genderinklusive Sprache auf Städte-Webseiten in Deutschland, Österreich, der Schweiz und Südtirol. Empirische Analysen für die Jahre 2022–2024. In: Zeitschrift für Angewandte Linguistik 84, S. 65–90. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfal-2026-2003>.

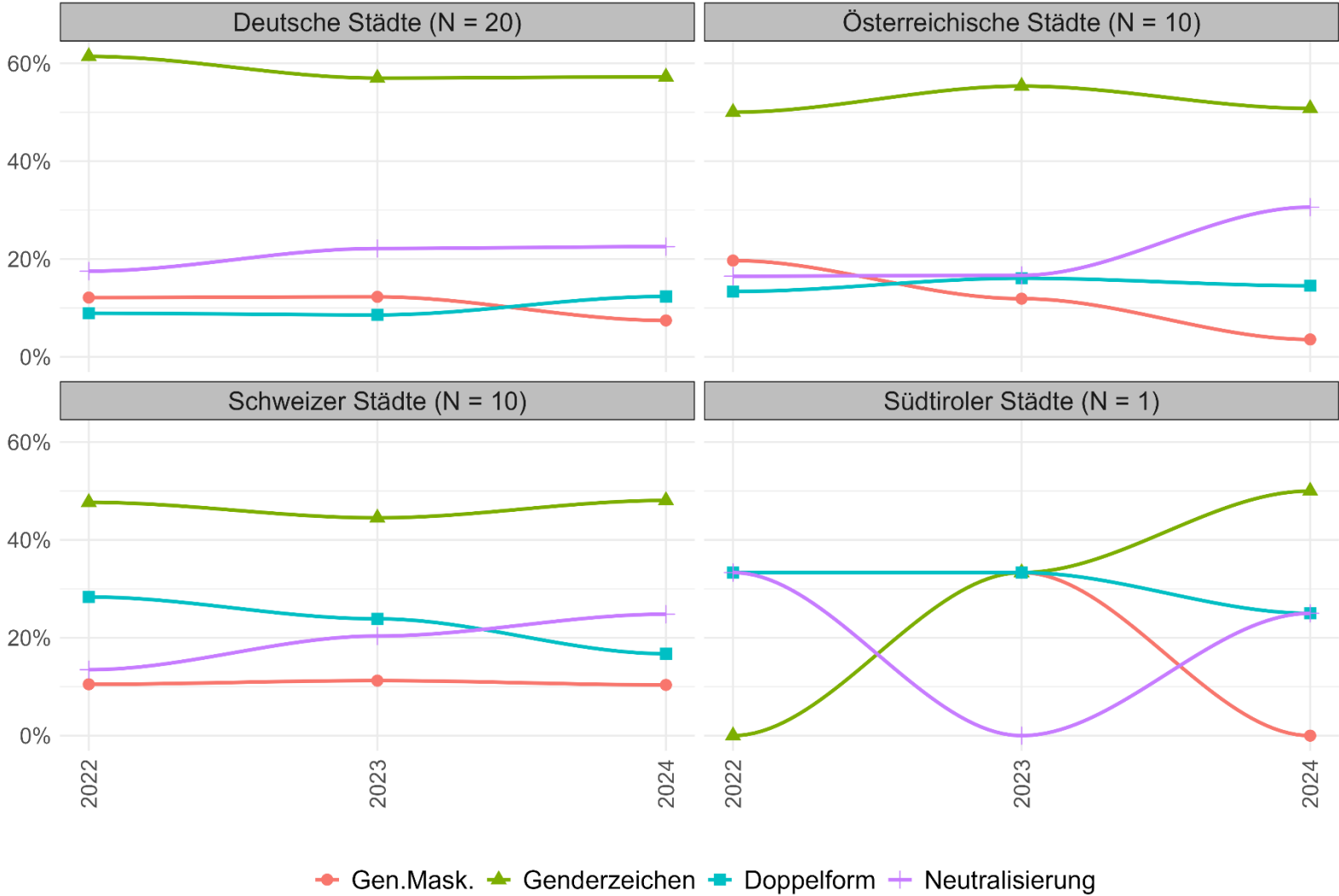
RESULTS: CITY WEBSITES (CHANGE OF ADDRESS)



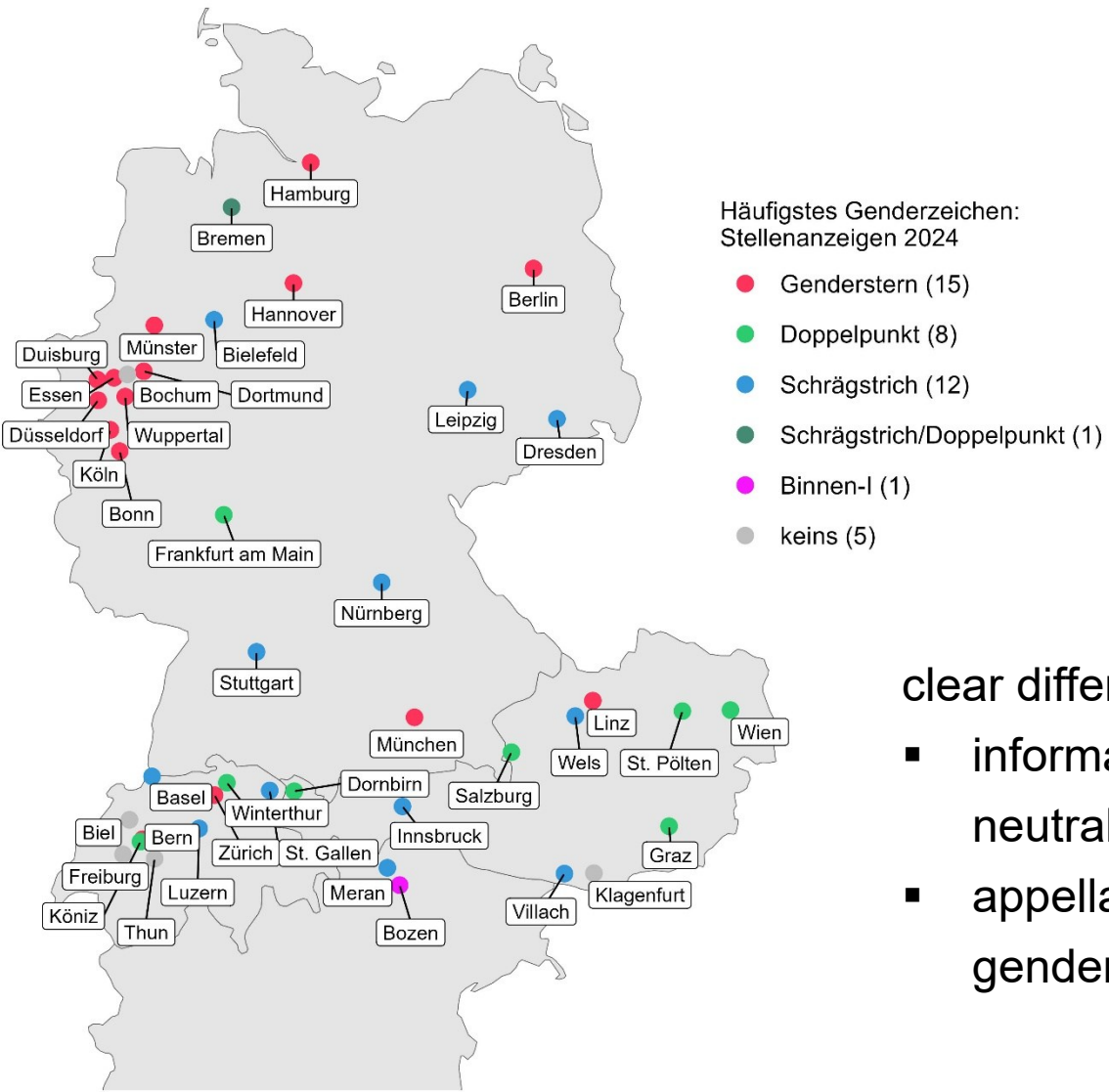
RESULTS: CITY WEBSITES (CHANGE OF ADDRESS)



RESULTS: CITY WEBSITES (JOB ADS)



RESULTS: CITY WEBSITES (JOB ADS)



clear differentiation:

- informative text type = neutralizations
- appellative text type = gender symbols

RESULTS: CITY WEBSITES AFTER THE BANS

- new data collection in late 2025/early 2026 for cities that
 - could be subject to regional bans in Germany: Munich & Nuremberg + [Aschaffenburg](#) (Bavaria), Dresden & Leipzig (Saxony), Frankfurt am Main (Hesse)
 - have their own guidelines in Switzerland: Zurich, Bern, Biel, Winterthur, Luzern + [Uster](#), [Frauenfeld](#)
 - total of 13 cities (3 of which were not part of the previous data collections)

RESULTS: CITY WEBSITES AFTER THE BANS (GERMANY)

City	Change-of-address	Job ads	Relation to guidelines	Relation to bans	Changes compared to 2024
Munich (Bavaria)	Mostly neutralizations, 1 gender star (<i>Bürger*innen</i>)	Mostly gender star (15/20)	(Differentiation?)	Gender symbols are banned in Bavaria	No gender symbol on CoA
Nuremberg (Bavaria)	Mostly neutralizations, some pair forms, no gender symbols	Mostly slash (14/20)	Differentiation	Gender symbols are banned in Bavaria → slash variant as officially sanctioned option	-
Aschaffenburg (Bavaria)	Only two personal nouns, one of which has a gender star (<i>Bürger*innen</i>)	Mostly gender star (7/10)	Non-compliance through official rejection	Gender symbols are banned in Bavaria	-

RESULTS: CITY WEBSITES AFTER THE BANS (GERMANY)

City	Change-of-address	Job ads	Relation to guidelines	Relation to bans	Changes compared to 2024
Dresden (Saxony)	Mostly neutralizations, no gender symbols	Mostly slash (9/20) and generic masculine (7/20)	(Differentiation?)	Gender symbols are banned in Saxony → slash variant as officially sanctioned option	-
Leipzig (Saxony)	Mostly neutralizations, one slash (<i>EU-Bürger/-innen</i>)	Mostly slash (15/20)	compliance in all documents	Gender symbols are banned in Saxony → slash variant as officially sanctioned option	No slash on CoA
Frankfurt am Main (Hesse)	Mostly neutralizations, two slashes (<i>EU-Bürger/-innen</i> , <i>Nicht-EU-Bürger/-innen</i>)	Mostly colon , e.g. <i>Sozialarbeiter:in</i> (19/20)	Differentiation	Gender symbols are banned in Hesse	-

RESULTS: CITY WEBSITES AFTER THE BANS (SWITZERLAND)

City	Change-of-address	Job ads	Relation to guidelines	Relation to bans	Changes compared to 2024
Zurich	Mostly neutralizations, 5 gender stars (e.g. <i>Zürcher*innen</i> , <i>Partner*in</i>)	Mostly gender stars and slashes (11/20)	Differentiation	Bans are respected in legal and official texts	Capital-I instead of gender star on CoA (e.g. <i>BürgerInnen</i>)
Bern	Mostly neutralizations, 1 gender star (<i>Wochenaufhalter*in</i>)	Mostly gender star (14/20)	(Differentiation ?)	Bans are respected in legal and official texts	No gender symbol on CoA
Winterthur	Mostly neutralizations, 3 colons (e.g. <i>Bewohner:innen</i>)	Mostly colons and slashes (18/20)	Differentiation	Bans are respected in legal and official texts	Slashes instead of colons on CoA (e.g. <i>Einwohner/-in</i>)

RESULTS: CITY WEBSITES AFTER THE BANS (SWITZERLAND)

City	Change-of-address	Job ads	Relation to guidelines	Relation to bans	Changes compared to 2024
Luzern	Neutralizations and generic masculines, no gender symbols	Mostly gender star (14/20)	Differentiation	Bans are respected in legal and official texts	Mostly slashes in job ads instead of gender star
Biel	Only pair forms (e.g. <i>Schweizerin</i> <i>n und Schweizer</i>)	Mostly pair forms (17/20)	Differentiation	Bans are respected in legal and official texts	-
Uster	Only neutralizations	Mostly neutralizations and pair forms (22/23)	Differentiation	Bans are respected in legal and official texts	-
Frauenfeld	Only neutralizations	Mostly colons (11/20)	Differentiation	Bans are respected in legal and official texts	-

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- Most guidelines recommend at least one non-binary gender symbol
- **Differentiation** of the gender-inclusive forms for different texts and contexts was already present in the guidelines and on the city websites **before the gender symbol bans**
- notably: bans did not lead to total avoidance of (non-binary) gender symbols on the websites; some cities even added them (Munich, Bern) or changed binary variants to non-binary ones (Zurich, Winterthur, Luzern)
- most cities did not implement any changes after the bans
- gender symbols very popular in job ads → audience, text type
- Expectation after the bans: changes mainly undertaken in terms of differentiation between different texts (legal/official vs others) and target groups (e.g. addressing non-binary people)
- **in total: legal situation unclear, linguistic situation complex**