

## **Extended Summary:**

### **“The German invention of leftwing extremism – the importance of party-politics for radicalisation awareness.**

by Harald Weilnböck

The paper values the Northern Irish ‘Challenge Hate Crime’ project which systematically approached issues of violent extremism and sectarianism by both developing targeted social interventions and discussing party-political and media discourses. These discourses, while being non-extremist but possibly polarizing in their effects, have proved immensely important for any on the ground anti-hate-crime and ‘deradicalization’ work. Most European governments, however, hesitate to address extremism, hate crime and human rights violations in a clear, bi-partisan and self-conscious manner.

Here the paper focuses on Germany’s conservative party-political discourses which had always tended to deny or downplay the threat of neo-Nazism and xenophobic incidents – especially in the eastern states’ rural areas and small towns after reunification. The case of Mügeln explores how and why especially local mayors are caught in denial and fear and how party-political rhetoric has counter-productive impact.

By contrast, social-democratic chancellor Gerhard Schröder through his “Uprising of the Decent” initiative had launched a comprehensive federal Prevent Program against ‘Rightwing Extremism, Xenophobia and Anti-Semitism’ in 2000. However, the following chancellorship of Christian democrat Angela Merkel surprisingly decided to kick off a program against “leftwing extremism”, which most experts agreed is neither un-constitutional nor does it amount to a serious threat of group-related hate crime/ terrorism in Germany today – or else is a sizable need of specialized youth social work. Moreover, the government decreed a mandatory Democracy Declaration (or “extremism clause”) to be signed by NGOs. Quite irrational and insubstantial concerns seemed at work, that hate crime prevent work could ‘utilize leftwing extremist means’. This effectively denigrated and alienated those civil society activists who – often at the risk of being personally harassed and injured – facilitate this kind of work on the ground.

The historic analysis of conservative party-political rhetoric since World War II can demonstrate that, while both the program and the extremism clause have quite embarrassingly failed, they followed an old and quite effective pattern of: 'Blame everything on leftwing violent extremists, and claim that rightwing extremism or neo-Nazi terror is not an issue in Germany'. This can be shown to characterize Helmut Kohl's chancellorship (1982-1998), his concept of the "spiritual-moral turn-around", the "mercy of late birth", his wreath ceremony at an SS officers cemetery together with Ronald Reagan (Bitburg 1985), and with the notorious Historian's Dispute from 1986/87 in which conservative Ernst Nolte attempted to offset – and in part excuse – Germany's National Socialism of the Third Reich by Stalinism and the "red army" which were perceived to precede and provoke Nazism.

As to terrorism discourses, after the 1980 Munich Oktober-Fest bombing, the Christian-conservative Bavarian CSU and its outstanding leader Strauß attempted to blame it on leftwing extremist RAF-terrorist, on east German 'Stasi', Russian 'KGB' and/or on Gaddafi, while knowing and illegally concealing (basically up to last year) ample evidence about the assassin's close ties to the neo-Nazi terrorist Hoffmann group. The group wanted to influence the upcoming elections in favor of CSU candidate Strauß.

Tragically, through this rhetoric of Blaming-the-left and Denying-the-neo-Nazi-threat, the Hoffmann group felt so assured that it proceeded to assassinate their enemy Shlomo Levin, a nationally renowned Jewish author from Nürnberg only weeks after the Munich bombing. Already at the hostage-taking and killing of the Israeli Olympic team at the Games in 1972 in Munich by the Palestinian "Black September" movement it was widely suggested that leftist RAF terrorists helped preparing it while intelligence services knew this wasn't the case and, instead, neo-Nazi individuals had assisted the Palestinians.

In recent years this discourse pattern of Blaming-the-left has been powerfully resurrected by the so-called New Bourgeoisie and bestselling authors like Peter Hahne who attributed all sorts of perceived and real problems (decrease of birthrate, breakdown of social welfare, 'crisis of education', loss of 'roots' and 'values', lack of foreigner integration etc.) on the so-called 1968 generation of the 'student revolution' days. Other authors of the New Bourgeoisie like Thilo Sarrazin blamed the Muslims. The New Bourgeoisie's mostly insubstantial and irrational discourses – and resentments – coincide with the New Right, the intellectual branch of extremist rightwing organizations. Above all, when turned into actual policy-making by conservative administrations – e.g. the "leftwing extremism" program and financial cuts for anti hate crime work (the Miteinander NGO) – these discourses inadvertently have highly detrimental

effects for any on the ground efforts to reduce hate crime and violent extremism especially among the young.

In consequence, when conservative politicians and New Bourgeoisie authors were busy in their discourse of Blaming-leftwing-extremists (and or Muslims) and Denying-rightwing-extremism-threats – and when renowned national newspapers began referring to anti-gentrification and similar civil society activists as “leftwing extremists” –, something unexpected and yet quite foreseeable had evolved up to 2011: A neo-Nazi murder gang under the name of “National Socialist Underground” had been covertly active for more the ten years, committing random cold-blooded ethnic murders in execution style – which the media deplorably labeled “Kebab-Killings” –, producing denigrating videos about their victims, conducting bank robberies, and living safely in the midst of east German state Saxony amongst its support circles. Intelligence services and criminal police failed – moreover, it was found that services recently destroyed relevant files.

Despite all this, since this shocking discovery from last year, nothing has changed in governmental rhetoric and policies. The center-right government decidedly continued its controversial leftwing extremism program, and local administrations still deny any neo-Nazism threats in their communities as they have done before.

The paper ends by emphasizing how unchanging and irrational party-political and media discourses may be – even when being disproved by empirical evidence. It then formulates its key question: What could possibly be done in order to render more resilient and more responsible these public discourses in view of vitally important societal issues as terrorism, extremism, and hate crime prevention. Here the author suggests to collaborate with the newly inaugurated EU Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN). As a first step exemplary case stories should be collect about what logic party-political discourses on hate crime and extremism(s) follow throughout different EU Member States and what consequences they have for the local prevent work – and for safeguarding human rights and free democratic societies.