

## **Combatting Right-Wing Extremism: The Role of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution**

**Speech given by Claudia Schmid, Head of the Berlin Office for the  
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Ladies and Gentlemen, I am very happy to be here and to have the chance to make a few remarks on the topic of right-wing extremism and the role of the Verfassungsschutz in combatting right-wing extremism.

When I thought about this workshop and wrote down a few remarks, it struck me how different the world is today in comparison to 20 years ago. 20 years ago, it would have been unthinkable that the head of the Verfassungsschutz Berlin would deliver a speech at Frankfurt an der Oder about right-wing extremism to an audience of German and Polish scholars.

Today, Germans and the Polish are no longer caught on one side of an iron curtain. Instead, we talk and discuss about a common thread to all of us: right-wing extremism. Although the topic is serious enough and a potential thread to democracy and pluralism, we can also concede that Germany and Poland, two democracies devoted to the idea of European unification, struggle against a common enemy. These are pretty good news, I think!

## **1 The Situation in Berlin**

Right-wing extremism is a very complex phenomenon. To avoid redundancy, I would like to concentrate on two points: firstly, how the Verfassungsschutz perceives the phenomenon of right-wing extremism in Berlin today, and secondly, what strategy the Verfassungsschutz developed to combat it.

Let me start with the current situation in Berlin. If we look at the structures of right-wing extremism in Berlin today, the most important fact is probably the organisational fragmentation. We do not have a single institution that would be able to enforce its will or strategy on others. Rather, we see a both fragmented and competitive environment of mostly small groups and parties.

We distinguish between three different spheres of risk, each one representing a specific threat to the democratic system: the action-oriented, the parliament-oriented, and the discourse-oriented right-wing extremism.<sup>1</sup>

### *1.1 Action-Oriented Right-Wing Extremism*

The most visible sphere of risk is the action-oriented right-wing extremism. The specific risk is related to the visible public space. Right-wing extremists try to “reclaim the streets” and to exercise power in forms of deciding who is allowed to feel secure when walking on the streets, who is allowed to live in certain parts of a city etc. The action-oriented right-wing extremism in Berlin consists of two networks:

First, we see a network of smaller groups and sub-networks which is involved in the production and distribution of right-wing extremist music. This network consists of about 200 people. The network is fragmented into smaller groups, like the “Vandalen” or the “Hammerskins”. Another important part are bands like “Spreegeschwader”. The members are usually in their thirties or forties, often having started a career in right-wing extremism in the German Democratic Republic in the late

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. SENATSVERWALTUNG FÜR INNERES (2005): Verfassungsschutzbericht 2004. Berlin. P. 12 ff.

1980s. These members show no signs of “retiring” from membership in extremist structures after reaching the mid-twenties.

The second network of action-oriented right-wing extremism in Berlin consists of so-called Kameradschaften, or Comradeships. In the last three years, we saw an increasingly dynamic development in this network. Currently, it consists of about 200 people. The most important feature is probably the adaptation of codes and strategies of left-wing extremists. We saw protest forms like occupation of vacant houses, assemblies in the public space, featuring banners and slogans that resemble of left-wing demonstrations. As an example, the slide shows some of the banners and pictures from demonstrations. The rationale behind it is obviously to get rid of the image of “old-fashioned” Nazism and to appear modern and “hip”. Furthermore, at least one part of the network commits acts of violence mostly against left-wing Antifa-groups.<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, the members of this network are much younger than the music network-members. They are usually between 17 and 25 years old.

### 1.2 *Parliament-Oriented Right-Wing Extremism*

The second sphere of risk consists of the parliament-oriented right-wing extremism. The main institutions here are the right-wing extremist parties like the NPD (with about 150 members in Berlin), DVU (450 members), and Republikaner (400 members). For Berlin, it is fair to say that no party developed ubiquitous structures, mainly due to a lack of manpower. Today, we see two strategic attempts of right-wing extremist parties to overcome this weakness. First, the NPD implemented a strategy of influencing the action-oriented right-wing extremism in Berlin. The success of this attempt varied in the past. Generally, the NPD had problems to establish the image of being “genuine” in action-oriented circles. Nevertheless, the NPD is somehow attractive for action-oriented right-wing extremists because it provides material resources that they lack. A second strategy is the attempt to coordinate the electoral activities between right-wing extremist parties. This led to an alliance between NPD and DVU during the electoral campaign in 2005. Although this alliance can be regarded as a success for the NPD, the results of the elections did not meet the expectations of the NPD. The NPD gained 1,6 %, and the other right-wing extremist party, the REP, only 0,5%.

### 1.3 *Discourse-Oriented Right-Wing Extremism*

The third and last sphere of risk consists of the discourse-oriented right-wing extremists. The main aim of these extremists is to influence the public discourse, to build bridges to right-wing extremist and revisionist topics, and to break the cultural hegemony of the left, as they perceive it.

Structurally, the discourse-oriented right-wing extremism is much more interregionally linked than most other substructures of right-wing extremism. In Berlin, groups that are associated to the former left-wing extremist Horst Mahler are the most visible parts of the network. The network consists of approximately 50 members, organised in some smaller groups and “clubs”. None of these groups is of greater relevance. The network is highly dependend and focused on the person of Mahler.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. SENATSWERWALTUNG FÜR INNERES BERLIN (2005): Im Fokus: Rechte Gewalt in Berlin. Berlin.

## 1.4 *Assessing the Risks*

This description of the structures contemporary right-wing extremism in Berlin would be incomplete without an assessment of risks. The following points seem to be important to me:

First, as already mentioned, right-wing extremism is extremely fragmented. We do not face a single powerful entity. This fragmentation mirrors the lack of strategy and capacity of contemporary right-wing extremism.

Secondly, structures are important for the success of right-wing-extremism, but not the only factor. Especially for the parliament-oriented extremism we can concede that other factors such as fear in society of societal change and the desire to protest against the mainstream are important. Unsurprisingly, we have seen relative electoral successes of right-wing extremist parties in some parts of Germany where these parties had no real roots or manpower “on the ground”. Examples are the electoral results of the DVU, which lacks structures in most federal states and which is highly dependent on the material resources of its founder Gerhard Frey. In short, there is no simple correlation between electoral results and structures of parties. In consequence, it is very difficult to predict the development of right-wing extremist parties.

Third, we have strong evidence that right-wing extremism in Berlin tends to cluster in some parts of Berlin. Our data on right-wing extremist structures, violence, meeting places and places of residence show that right-wing extremism is concentrated in some eastern parts in Berlin.<sup>3</sup> This uneven distribution of right-wing extremism implies certain risks, although we definitely cannot speak of “national befreite Zonen”, or “nationally liberated zones” in Berlin. Nevertheless, we have a focus on these areas in Berlin in order to prevent any attempts of right-wing extremists to influence the daily life in these parts of Berlin.

## 2 **Strategies**

### 2.1 *Introduction*

I hope this short overview on right-wing extremism in Berlin gave you an impression of the current situation. Probably the most important question is how we deal with this phenomenon. In order to describe the strategy of the Verfassungsschutz, I would like to distinguish between input-, throughput-, and output-strategies.<sup>4</sup> Input strategy refers to the way we gather information and data. It includes both open sources and intelligence sources. Throughput strategies refer to the way we process information and design our analysis. Finally, output strategies describe the transmission of information. It is the latter I will concentrate on. The reason for defining the output as “transmission of information” is of course related to the fact that the Verfassungsschutz has no executive rights, but rather acts as a provider of information. I would like to distinguish between two different recipients of this information: first, decision-makers, and second, the general public.

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<sup>3</sup> SENATSVORWALTUNG FÜR INNERES (2005): Im Fokus: Rechte Gewalt in Berlin. Berlin. Kap. 2.3.

<sup>4</sup> The model is based on David Eastons „Input-Output“-model. Cf. DAVID EASTON (1965): A Framework for Political Analysis. Englewood Cliffs.

## 2.2 *Consulting Decision-Makers*

First, we provide information for decision-makers. In order to be able to implement a repressive policy against right-wing extremism, cooperation with the police and other state institutions is crucial. In Berlin, we are especially lucky because this cooperation works very well. Most importantly, all state institutions share our view that extremism must be combatted by all legal means. It is true that right-wing extremism is a societal phenomenon, which cannot be eradicated by state action alone. Nevertheless, state action plays a crucial role. This is true for several reasons.

First, we have been able to cut money supply to right-wing extremism due to repressive action. As you could imagine, right-wing extremists were not only dealing with illegal CDs because they like the music so much. In the past, the music business was one of the few sources of income for right-wing extremists. As for as Berlin is concerned, this is history. Berlin became well-known over the past decade for its strict policy against right-wing extremist music. You probably remember the legal actions against bands like “WAR”, “Landser”, or “Spreegeschwader” in the last couple of years. The Superior Court of Justice Berlin sentenced the members of the band “Landser” for forming a criminal organisation according to § 129 Penalty Code. It was the first time ever that a music band was considered a criminal organisation. This was a strong signal. A second important aspect of repressive policies is the interruption of structures. Due to prohibition of several organisations, like the “Kameradschaft Tor” or “BA-SO” in March 2005, we were able to rise the communication costs for right-wing extremists. Although these efforts surely trigger efforts to restructure, they nevertheless tie resources and distract them from strategical employment.

Furthermore, the band “Spreegeschwader” was hindered to play concerts in foreign countries (mostly Eastern European) by the imposition of restrictions on the validity of passports. The same is true for the legal tool of indexing sound storage media. CDs by right-wing extremists Bands in Berlin were indexed by the Federal Department for Media Harmful to Young Persons in 2004 and 2005. The consequence of indexing is the prohibition of advertising and selling the CD in the public space.

We have seen no right-wing extremist concerts in Berlin since 2000. All attempts were scotched by joined action of police and Verfassungsschutz. It is important to mention that we do not focus on the music itself. The music is available in the internet anyway. Rather, we focus on the financial and social aspect of music, the efforts to make money from music, and the function of music and especially concerts as meeting and focal points.<sup>5</sup> As you can see, the policy of the state government of Berlin against right-wing extremism is one of zero tolerance. I can assure you that the right-wing extremists themselves feel the pain of this policy very directly. We know from our sources that Berlin has the reputation of being a tough place to live for right-wing extremists.

## 2.3 *Consulting the Public*

Let me now make a few remarks about the second customer of our work, the general public. I already mentioned that right-wing extremism is a societal phenomenon, that cannot be tackled solely by repressive policies. Although we regard repressive policies as efficient and necessary, at the same

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. SENATSWERWALTUNG FÜR INNERES (2002): Im Fokus: Rechtsextremistische Skinheads. Berlin. Ch. 7.

time we increased our efforts to contribute to an open and empirically sound discourse about right-wing extremism. Intelligence work and the participation at the public discourse are not exclusive in my opinion. The opposite is true. The Verfassungsschutz sells a product which is highly demanded in the public: consultancy in security issues.

One product line which has been particularly successful is the „Focus“ publications series. Since 2002, we published four extensive studies with a scientific focus about the topics of Skinheads, Antisemitism, Right-wing violence, and Islamism. More Focus-publications are on their way. For next year, we are hoping to finish studies about left-wing extremism. Especially the study about right-wing violence opened some doors for us, both in science and in general public. It is the first empirical study in Germany that combined an analysis of right-wing violence with a geographical approach. I already mentioned that the clustering of right-wing extremism in some parts of Berlin is a risk. The mapping-approach is our strategical answer to this phenomenon. Right-wing extremism has a locus, and we wanted to “back couple” it to its space, because it is exactly the geographical space where we have to combat it. Maps are not just an illustration, but an analytical tool with a high relevance for developing strategies to cope with this problem.

Besides science and media, we also have a focus on what we call the “front line” of combatting right-wing extremism. These are the people and institutions who actually get in direct contact to right-wing extremism, like teachers, politicians on community level, NGO-workers, the staff of correctional facilities and the uniformed police. We tried to expand our reach to these people over the last years, and did so with success. Over the last years, the number of briefings increased considerably, as you can see on the graph. Our aim is to provide information and argument. On the other side, it is very important to us to stay in touch with the “front-line” and to learn from them about new developments and problems.

### **3 Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the output-strategy of the Verfassungsschutz Berlin can be described as a two-track approach. First, we recognise that repression and zero tolerance are both on a symbolic and an empirical level necessary and efficient. Those who commit violence or try to undermine the societal consensus of tolerance in Germany will not enjoy the same freedom as others do. Second, we recognise that precautionary measures and the provision of “front line” institutions with arguments and data is as important as repression. We strongly believe that there is no “either – or” question. Repression and a public discourse about combatting right-wing extremism are both indispensable. A strategy based on only one of both is ill-equipped to deal with right-wing extremism efficiently.

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your attention.