

Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: A Common Task of Prevention Policy, Prevention Research and Prevention Practice

Erich Marks

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to the opening of our conference on 'Building an evidence base for the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism' at the Hanover Congress Centre. I am delighted that the conference programme has attracted numerous international top experts and would like to take this opportunity to thank all speakers for their willingness to undertake long journeys to speak at our conference and participate in our interdisciplinary debate, which will focus on the fields of prevention policy, prevention research and prevention practice.

When I approached my colleague Andreas Armbrorst in late summer 2016 to suggest that we jointly organise this conference, we came to an immediate agreement that we should invite top-ranking extremism and radicalisation researchers working at the international level in a variety of different fields. Aside from an immanent exchange between the scientists, we also wanted to create an opportunity for decision-makers in politics, administration and prevention practice to join in the discussion at the conference. Thank you very much, Andreas Armbrorst, for your friendly, smooth and productive collaboration. I would also like to thank all those who worked behind the scenes to prepare this conference, both in terms of content and organisation. In specific, I would like to mention the outstanding commitment and work performed by Catrin Trautmann.

We intentionally developed the overall concept and aims of the conference, and the formulation of the invitation, within a narrow framework: "Although the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism ranks high on the international political agenda, our understanding of the impact of preventive programs and measures remains limited."¹

Following Andreas Armbrorst's earlier outline of the tasks and key activities of the German National Centre for Crime Prevention (Nationales Zentrum Kriminalprävention, NZK)², I would now like to briefly introduce the second organiser of this conference, the German Congress on Crime Prevention (Deutscher Präventionstag)³ which was established in 1995

and has since developed into the biggest annual conference on crime prevention and associated prevention issues worldwide. In 2012, the German Congress on Crime Prevention set up an Institute for Applied Prevention Research (dpti) to create a platform and forum for information exchange, knowledge transfer and interdisciplinary dialogue between the fields of prevention research, policy and practice.⁴ In the last few years, the German Congress on Crime Prevention has focussed specifically on the subjects of prevention of violent extremism, de-radicalisation and strengthening of democracy as well as strengthening communal resilience approaches. These priority subjects have been shaping both the provision of information and consultation in the context of the annual congress and the fledgling history of the Institute for Applied Prevention Research. We are involved in various research projects, offer regular webinars and carry out pilot projects to contribute towards the strengthening of communal prevention strategies that counter radicalisation and violent extremism.

At the international level, we are currently observing a growing emphasis on the importance of preventive action. Given the range of undesirable societal conditions and developments, demands for a significant increase of prevention measures, orientation and strategies are intensifying. In many cases, such calls for 'more prevention' do not go beyond well-meaning catchphrases, or are presented as an alleged new panacea without any specific concepts, plans or links to concrete political or practical action.

To quote philosopher and political scientist Hannah Arendt, born in Hanover in 1906: "Understanding is not the same as denying the monstrous, comparing the unprecedented with precedents or explaining phenomena with analogies and generalisations that disregard the harrowing reality and shocking experience. Instead, it means investigating and consciously bearing the burden placed on us by the events, and neither denying their existence nor submissively bowing under their weight, as if everything that happened could not have happened any other way. In other words, understanding means confronting reality without bias, whatever this reality is or was."⁵ Specific and concrete preventive action crucially depends on a thorough understanding of the prevailing situation – especially with a view to current social, political and environmental framework conditions at the global level.

The development of effective prevention and intervention strategies to counter violent extremism is a task that must be addressed by society as a whole and depends crucially on

civic initiatives and discourse. The broad ambit of government and professional action in the field of prevention specifically requires prevention policies, research and practice.



This diagram illustrates the interdependency between the three areas at all levels - from regional to global - as well as the need for co-operation based on subsidiary principles (top down and bottom up). Furthermore, successful coaction between the areas of prevention policy, prevention research and prevention practice requires each area to create specific conditions conducive to co-operation, namely:

first Multidisciplinary approaches,

also Establishment of positions and profiles and

finally Development of information and communication strategies.

In the context of this conference, I would like to focus specifically on science and research.



The flower diagram reflects the complexity and diversity of scientific disciplines and sub-disciplines that are, or should be, involved in the efforts to push back and prevent terrorism, radicalisation and violent extremism. Science must become much better at linking up research questions, methods and results. Hence, the management of knowledge, information and communication based on both established and additional research approaches is a priority task, firstly between the different scientific disciplines and secondly in political consultations, practical recommendations and qualification programmes.

The two lists below illustrate the fact that the above processes explicitly relate to all central fields of research and all different institutional framework conditions.



Again, communication strategies must be developed from innumerable diversities, individual findings and various competences that facilitate the creation of a comprehensive picture. I am confident that this conference will make a valuable contribution to this objective.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly mention conference documents and the possibility of a follow-up conference. We hope that all speakers will make their presentations available to us to allow us to publish them on our conference website and in printed form. On top of this, we would be delighted if individual speakers would consider making their expertise available via English-language webinars. These webinars will be geared specifically towards the wider target group of concerned decision-makers in politics, administration and prevention practice.

Even though we are just launching into our current conference, I would like to take this opportunity to invite you to the follow-up conference in June 2018, which will also be entitled 'Building an evidence base for the prevention of radicalisation and violent extremism'. As an accompanying event of the 23rd German Congress on Crime Prevention in Dresden, the follow-up conference will again involve close co-operation with several

European and international organisations. We will keep you up to date with the developments and will send out invitations in due time.

And now all that is left for me to do is wish you all a productive conference with valuable insights and fruitful discussions.

¹ “To reduce the threat of terrorism and political violence effectively and through proven practices, policy makers and practitioners need a reliable evidence base. Rigorous evaluation is also crucial for political accountability as public spending is growing hand in hand with concerns about the effectiveness of these programs. Consequently, we need to know whether the action taken is actually leading to the desired effect, given that the implementation and delivery of preventive measures consumes the precious time of various professional groups. We therefore need a better evidence base to verify whether social intervention – be it in school, in the community or in prison - is worth our efforts.

The conference will bring together selected researchers, practitioners and policy makers with the following goals:

- to debate the virtues of “evidence-based practises” in the context of radicalisation and violent extremism;
- to discuss the right balance between necessary pragmatism and scientific rigor;
- to share and identify metrics, benchmarks and indicators for (transferable) good practices of violent extremism prevention;
- to identify and build technical expertise in evaluating counter-radicalization practices and
- to give room for informal dialogue between the participants.“

² <http://www.nzkrim.de/english/>

³ <http://www.praeventionstag.de/nano.cms/international>

⁴ Founded in 1995, the German Congress on Crime Prevention – GCOCP (in German: Deutscher Präventionstag – DPT) has developed into the world’s largest annual conference on the topic of crime prevention and related prevention areas. In addition to this, the GCOCP acts as a platform for information, knowledge transfer and interdisciplinary dialogue between prevention practice, prevention research and prevention policy.

The DPT Institute for Applied Prevention Research (dpt-i) was established in 2012 and promotes dialogue between prevention research, practice and policy. The Institute’s approach to prevention research is specifically based on the principles formulated by the International Society for Prevention Research (SPR). Other important international partner organisations include the European Society for Prevention Research (EUSPR), the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP), the Violence Prevention Alliance (VPA) of the WHO and the National Center for Crime Prevention (NZK) as well as the Institute for Criminology Lower Saxony (KFN) and other (international) research institutes.

Key activities of the dpt-i include:

1. Intensification of dialogue between science, politics, administration, organisations and civil society on the results of prevention research with the aim of creating a stronger knowledge base in the field of prevention
2. Co-operation with other scientific institutions in order to implement research projects with a practical orientation
3. Consulting of the German Congress on Crime Prevention and its partner organizations concerning the results and current state of prevention research
4. Implementation of research projects involving the prospective practical application of research results.

⁵ Hannah Arendt (1986), ‘Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft’: Antisemitismus. Imperialismus. Totale Herrschaft, 25