

Conference Report: “The Psychology of Crime-Related Radicalization” May 8-9 2014 in Trier**Daniel Köhler¹**

On May 8 and 9 the University of Trier’s Departments of Law and Psychology hosted their first interdisciplinary and international conference on the legal and psychological aspects of violent and non-violent radicalization processes, potentially leading to severe criminal acts or terrorism.

Attended by over 90 professionals, the event brought together many, nationally and internationally, highly renowned experts in this field from numerous disciplines such as law, sociology, social psychology, and political science, as well as various students and practitioners. Recognizing the necessity and importance of the topic for the German legal system, judges from the German Federal High Court of Justice and the German Federal Constitutional Court attended the conference to follow the panels and discussions.

After the key-note address by Professor Arie Kruglanski (University of Maryland and START Center for the Study of Terrorism) on the individual “quest for significance” and its role in radicalization processes, the conference moved on to debate organization-related offences within the German criminal code and its core definitions and concepts, such as ‘gangs’, ‘groups’, ‘associations’ (Professor Friedrich—Christian Schroeder – University of Regensburg); the influence of groups on ‘extreme attitudes’ (Professor Eva Walther – University of Trier); EU legal impact on group-related offences (Professor Mark Zöller University of Trier); legal aspects around criminal and terrorist organizations (Nikolaos Gazeas – University of Cologne); the UN/EU terrorist lists (Anna Oehmichen – private lawyer); the psychology of de-radicalization (Professor Mark Dechesne – University of Leiden); the formation of prejudices and radicalization (Thomas Kessler – University of Jena); and criminological perspectives on serious acts of violence (Professor Britta Bannenberg – University of Gießen). Although placing the emphasis on an academic exchange across disciplines and various perspectives on a highly relevant topic – the emergence of violent

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radicalization processes and the adequate legal reaction – the conference included practical perspectives as well. Dr. Marwan Abu Taam from the State Office of Criminal Investigation (“Landeskriminalamt”) of Rhineland-Palatinate spoke about Islamic extremism drawing on his unique insights from current investigations against terrorists and highly radicalized persons. Daniel Köhler from the Berlin based Institute for the Study of Radical Movements (ISRM) – working closely with the non-governmental de-radicalization and disengagement program for highly radicalized right-wing extremists EXIT Germany - presented a final overview of group processes and their influences on right-wing radicalization processes, while particularly looking at cases of Far-Right terrorism in Germany since the late 1960s.

Debating how psychological insights on group processes, individual motivations and pathways towards radicalization as well as general psychological concepts may help to advance the judicial understanding and adequate implementation or adjustment of criminal law, the conference will yield, as a first outcome, a forthcoming special issue of the well known peer reviewed journal “Zeitschrift für Internationale Strafrechtsdogmatik (ZIS)” including in depth articles of all speakers².

Groups – independent of their legal definition – are clearly highly relevant in understanding individual radicalization processes. Providing frameworks for behaviour, collective identities and alternative individual social networks, even so called ‘lone actors’ usually perceive themselves as being part of a larger, sometimes even virtual, community of like minded persons. Understanding how groups influence these processes and how their involvement in crime related behaviour can be demonstrated is of vital interest to legal scholars, judges and lawyers, who have to deal with group related crimes originating in radical or extremist milieus. Thus this first conference was perceived by the participants and speakers alike as extremely successful and promising for future collaborations across different academic disciplines. Eventually the practical impact of such important endeavours could, for instance, include formulating concrete recommendations to adjust the criminal law according to this knowledge on group structures and psychological mechanisms of radicalization in order to adequately and effectively counter the threat posed by terrorist groups and individuals.

² The special issue can be downloaded at www.zis-online.com.