Introduction: Implications of Islamist attacks for police work in Germany and Berlin after the attack on Breitscheidplatz in December 2016

The Islamist attack on the Christmas market on Breitscheidplatz in Berlin in December 2016 marked a turning point in the German security architecture and police work. The immediate and long-term consequences of this attack are manifold and have led to significant changes, particularly in the capital city of Berlin. After the attack, it became clear that closer cooperation and coordination between different security authorities would be necessary in the future. This led to the establishment and strengthening of counter-terrorism centers, in particular the Joint Counter-Terrorism Center (GTAZ) in Germany.[1] The GTAZ, a cooperation of 40 German security authorities, was already founded in 2004, but was given a stronger role and increased resources after the Breitscheidplatz attack. These centers promote the exchange of information and strategic cooperation to combat terrorist threats.[2]

As a direct result of the terrorist attack on Breitscheidplatz, the Berlin police also established a new understanding of emergency response.[3] New tactics and strategies were developed to better respond to terrorist threats. These included increased security measures at major events, the increased presence of police and security forces in public places and the introduction of special anti-terror units. In the summer of 2021, the Berlin Police's Anti-Terror Center with a total of 1,200 officers from LKA departments 8 and 6 was housed in a central building complex strategically located in the Tempelhof district in the immediate vicinity of the Berlin city freeway and brought together to be able to act within a few minutes in ad hoc cases. Officers from the State Office of Criminal Investigation – which is responsible for combating Islamist terrorism – the Special Task Force (SEK), the Mobile Task Force (MEK), which is primarily responsible for observing suspects, as well as personal protection and searches have since been deployed there. The costs for this are said to have amounted to around 47 million euros.[4] The amount of money spent underlines the importance and new criminalistic focus in the repressive processing and prevention of the modus operandi of violent extremist acts by the Berlin police.

Department 8 of the State Office of Criminal Investigation, with its approx. 175 employees as part of the state security police of the federal capital, is therefore centrally responsible for preventing and combating politically motivated crimes in the phenomenon of Islamism.

In addition, LKA 8 conducts state security-specific financial investigations in connection with money laundering and terrorist financing. LKA 8 of the Berlin Police is divided into the department management with command service and three departments with different focal points and subject areas.[5]

Department 81 – Evaluation, Financial Investigations

- Strategic and operational evaluation
- Phenomenon-related threat assessment
- Processing of information
- Financial investigations specific to state security

Department 82 – Investigation: Processing of preliminary proceedings, in particular

- on suspicion of forming or being a member of a criminal/terrorist organization
- on suspicion of preparing a serious act of violence to endanger the state
- on the occasion of criminal offenses against association bans
- on the occasion of criminal offenses under the Code of Crimes against International Law

Department 83 – Person classification Islamism

- Centralized personal processing of individuals relevant to the case
- Operational intelligence and support activities
- Involvement in the review and implementation of measures related to residency law and the termination of residency by the Berlin Immigration Office[6]

In addition to the establishment of the counter-terrorism center at the Berlin State Security Agency, the establishment of a central office for the prevention of radicalization at the Berlin State Criminal Police Office – with some delay after the events – was intended as an indirect criminalistic response in autumn 2020 to the attack in December 2016.

In the run-up to the establishment of a new department at the Berlin Police, specific primary and secondary prevention measures were taken, particularly at Senate level, with the aim of reducing the radicalization of young people. These include educational and awareness-

raising programs as well as initiatives aimed at identifying at-risk individuals at an early stage, assessing their needs and providing support in the implementation of measures to prevent radicalization. To this end, the Berlin Senate has launched various projects that work at a local level and involve schools, youth centers and mosques.[7]

In addition to the level of primary and secondary prevention, programs for dissociation and exit work from politically or religiously radical or extremist milieus also play a central role. These tertiary or indicated prevention programs are aimed at people who have already been radicalized and aim to help them reintegrate into society. In Berlin and other parts of Germany, special programs have been developed for this purpose that address the individual needs of participants and provide psychological, social and educational support, among other things.

The Central Office for Radicalization Prevention and Deradicalization at the CID

The Unit for Radicalization Prevention and Deradicalization at the Central Office of Crime Prevention within the Criminal Investigation Division of the Berlin police was initially established in a conceptual phase in October 2020 after some latency, before it finally officially began its work as an office in summer 2021. The attack highlighted the need for a centralized and coordinated response to the threat of Islamist terrorism after a lengthy critical examination of the existing police structures within the Berlin police force. The aim of establishing the department was therefore to identify radicalization processes in the area of politically motivated crime at an early stage by means of an interdisciplinary approach. Subsequently, the needs of people at risk of radicalization or already in the process of radicalization were to be identified in order to develop preventative measures and ultimately refer those affected to the responsible offices of the nationwide regulatory organizations – such as youth welfare offices, the health, social or education system – or to the existing advisory services offered by civil society actors in the prevention landscape. The Central Office for Radicalization Prevention was also designed as a point of contact for those seeking advice and help, in order to support them in matters relating to radicalization prevention and processes of dissociation and disengagement work.[8]

The Central Office for Radicalization Prevention at the CID consists of experts from various disciplines who pursue the goal of ensuring a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to the topic of radicalization prevention and dissociation and disengagement work. The unit currently provides expertise in the following areas, among others:

- ***law enforcement officers***
  - Specialized in the detection of politically motivated crimes and syndromes of group-focused enmity as indicators of hate crime radicalization.
- ***psychological psychotherapy***
  - Expertise in the psychological aspects of radicalization and deradicalization, as well as analysis of case-related, specific risk and protection factors.
- ***political science***
  - Expert knowledge of ideologies related to the areas of hate crimes, right-wing extremism and other forms of extremism and their misuse by radicalized individuals or individuals at risk of radicalization.

The Central Office for Radicalization Prevention and Deradicalization – whose name is LKA Präv 4 within the organizational unit – has a number of tasks aimed at preventing the radicalization of individuals and promoting the willingness of those affected to disengage and leave already ongoing radicalization processes. According to the Berlin police as to the information material for the handout of the Central Office for Radicalization Prevention and Deradicalization, the individual case coordination is a core element of the unit. This involves the regular analysis of data and information from various sources in order to identify potentially radicalized individuals and forms the basis for effective preventative measures. In the course of this, multi-professional intervention strategies are to be developed by LKA Präv 4 specialists in order to support affected individuals in cooperation with families, schools and communities and, at best, to take advantage of offers from civil society.[9]

In contrast to other federal states, the Central Office for Radicalization Prevention and Deradicalization is not part of the State Security Police. This was done in order to consciously separate repression and prevention and to communicate this unequivocally to the public. This means that cooperation with personal cases that are being processed by LKA Präv 4 is based on the principle of consent and that information collected from individuals is not used to conduct criminal proceedings.[10]

Another special feature is that, unlike other security authorities in the federal states, LKA Präv 4 does not carry out the dissociation and disengagement work for radicalized individuals or those at risk of radicalization itself, but instead refers those affected to suitable civil society programs. One of the reasons for this is the clear separation of tasks, which makes it possible for LKA Präv 4 to provide authentic support services in which those affected can establish a trust-based relationship with qualified civil society professionals without being involved in permanent contact with police actors. This approach has proven to be effective for the Berlin Police, particularly due to the obligatory voluntary factor, and has so far been communicated as a positive change in the way the police perform their duties, especially by civil society organizations and those close to the people affected.[11]

In addition, the Central Office for Radicalization Prevention and Deradicalization is active in the training and further education of junior police officers in Berlin.[12] LKA Präv 4 is also involved in various networks and committees. Particular mention should be made here of the advisory board on radicalization prevention and deradicalization at the Berlin Senate Department for Inner Security.

The upcoming role of (Digital) Community Policing

Community policing can be an extremely effective tool for preventing and countering radicalization, which can lead to violent extremism and terrorism (P/CVE – Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism) without intervention. This is particularly crucial with regard to aspects that pose a risk of radicalization among young people in order to be able to dynamically intervene at an early stage from the police side in the context of P/CVE and geopolitical events in the event of potential major incidents such as acts of amok or politically or religiously motivated violent crimes, including attack scenarios.[13]

Examples include the terrorist attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019, which left 51 dead[14], and the attacks on synagogues in Halle, Germany, in October 2019[15] and Hanau, Germany, in February 2020, which left a total of 11 victims. The perpetrators had previously been online on platforms such as 4chan and 8chan, where they radicalized themselves, announced some of their actions and even streamed the attacks live on

platforms like Twitch. Some people actually watched the stream live as people lost their lives due to hatred and racism.[16]

People socialize online. They gather information online, they become radicalized online. They plan their attacks online. They announce their attacks online. Therefore, the relevance of digital community policing in addition to community policing has been discussed in many places for several years and was also highlighted in a conclusion paper published by the Radicalization Awareness Network in 2021. The network stated that community policing in particular is an extremely effective tool at local level for preventing and combating radicalization in order to preventively counter P/CVE. As extremist discourse is increasingly taking place online, the RAN concludes that security authorities should also address this shift in the world we live in and proactively engage with the digital space.[17]

For a better understanding of community policing and digital community policing, the following section takes a closer look at the terminology.

The difference between Community Policing and Digital Community Policing

There is no unanimous understanding of community policing – abbreviated to CP in the following – within academic research. Rather, CP is interpreted as a police philosophy that firstly focuses on local problems, secondly promotes the development of local crime prevention structures and thirdly extends traditional police work to new fields of work.[18]

In practice, CP approaches are often based on local police officers who are embedded in the neighborhood and who, in addition to traditional police tasks, should also keep an eye on the overall social structure of the area of operation. In this case, police officers are often assigned to a specific geographical section of the city in which they are present and accessible to members of the local community. The assigned officer should not primarily act in repressive contexts, but should mainly perform crime prevention tasks. The aim of the CP is to increase the residents' sense of security through personal relationships, to promote civic engagement for participation in the neighborhood through the networking of various actors and to reduce crime and the accumulation of misdemeanors through presence and

awareness-raising.[19]

Similar to CP, there is also no uniform definition of digital community policing – abbreviated to DCP in the following. Basically, "digital" in CP is understood as information technology or internet-based support for all police tasks and the associated work, information, communication and interaction processes.[20]

In practice, DCP often describes citizen-oriented police work in digital spaces. The field of activity ranges from "digital patrols", to the operation of individual, official profiles in social media by police officers, to the implementation of specific prevention measures (e.g. workshops) in the digital space. Through the offer and the associated low-threshold accessibility of direct online communication, an attempt is being made to transfer the CP's lifeworld-oriented approach to social media. As with the CP, the aim of the DCP is to increase users' sense of security through personal relationships, to build and maintain networks and to reduce crime through digital presence.[21]

Best practice approaches across Europe

As mentioned before, there are some countries in Europe that have been implementing different DCP approaches for some time. In the following, the current implementations of DCP are presented in a European comparison. It should be emphasized that this is a non-exhaustive selection of European countries and that the DCP approach varies significantly from country to country.

Online community policing in Iceland

One of them is the police in Iceland, which was assembled by the Berlin police as a source of information as part of a European internship in 2023. The visiting police officer was with several units of the Icelandic police, including the Reykjavík Metropolitan Police. The later written report on the European internship included the new approach by which the Icelandic police have implemented various activities to establish more online or digital community policing. Police forces are actively recognizable and approachable as police on

various platforms, including in the gaming sector. It was reported that the new approach was perceived as extremely positive and effective by both the civilian population and the Icelandic police after only a short time.[22]

Netherlands Community Police Officers

The preemptive identification of potential radicalization pathways that might culminate in violent extremism is inherently ambiguous. This uncertainty stems from the difficulty in foreseeing risk before any overt criminal behaviors manifest. In response to this challenge, local law enforcement agencies in the Netherlands are crucial to the implementation of counter-violent extremism (CVE) strategies, specifically through the proactive collection of information while individuals are yet to breach any laws. Nevertheless, there is a paucity of research on law enforcement officers' perceptions of their responsibilities under CVE initiatives.[23] As one of the practical outcomes, each regional unit has the option of appointing one of its regular community police officers as a digital community police officer (50%). Because of this, there are currently around 50 digital police officers who have formed a network. The Dutch police have announced a nationwide training program for digital police officers.[24]

Internet Patrol Unit, Norway

All 12 regional units in Norway have an internet patrol unit. In this three-person unit, Operator One engages with individuals and groups in spaces such as Discord and Minecraft via a "blue police profile" together, rather than as an identifiable individual officer with a face and name. Operator One is supported by Operator Two, who analyzes the relevant open source information. The third member of the patrol unit is the team leader who oversees the operation.[25]

Online police patrol the Internet in Denmark

The online patrol of the police in Denmark consists of 10 police officers and was founded in April 2022. Since its establishment in April 2022, the "Politiets Online Patrulje" has opened more than 65 cases by June 2023. These include crimes such as cybergrooming[26] and other cybercrime offenses, in particular theft, insults or other attempts at harassment,

primarily against young people.

Several times a month, the police officers play computer games such as CS:GO, Fifa or Fortnite. Under the names “Officer 1” to “Officer 4”, they play, observe and maintain contacts as if they were on a regular neighborhood patrol in person. They usually identify themselves openly, although on rare occasions they may operate covertly. On a typical day, the unit might join a Facebook group and say: ‘Hey, we’re from the police and if you want to talk to us or have any questions, just fire away’. Within a year, the unit has received more than 5,200 tips.[27]

Implementation of DCP at the Berlin police

After presenting the basic concept of digital community policing, and based on the results of other countries and the European internship of the Berlin police with the Icelandic police in 2023, a nationwide survey of all police forces in the Federal Republic of Germany on the topic of digital community policing was initiated by the Central Office of Radicalization Prevention within the Berlin police in spring 2024.[28]

This nationwide data collection by all police forces in Germany was initiated to examine the extent to which other state police forces/the federal police have introduced DCP or comparable concepts and how these are implemented in each case. The aim is to determine the extent to which the Berlin police can integrate digital community policing into existing aspects of police work in the future, in line with best practice. In the summer of 2024, the results of the survey were evaluated by the Central Office for Radicalization Prevention of the Berlin Police and prepared in the form of a synopsis for all police forces.[29]

The results of the nationwide survey of all German police forces revealed four main findings:

- ***Understanding of DCP***
  - Almost unified nationwide understanding of DCP as an approach to citizen-oriented digital interaction and prevention.
  - Different stages of development of the implementation and definition of DCP

between the federal states.

- ***DCP measures implemented and planned***
  - Some federal state polices have successfully implemented specific DCP initiatives and are integrating them into their day-to-day police work.
  - Others are still in the initial or planning phase.
- ***Challenges***
  - Resources: The need for financial, human and technical resources is the primary challenge.
  - Standardization: Lack of a consistent approach and standards in the implementation of DCP activities.
  - Data protection: Concerns about data protection and security in digital interaction.
- ***Achievements***
  - Positive effects in the form of increased proximity to citizens and more effective prevention are recognizable.[30]

Conclusion

The implementation of DCP is not without challenges. Nevertheless, the vast majority of police forces at the federal and state level are willing to address the issue of digital community policing in Germany. As a result, the planning and implementation status varies. Despite different levels of implementation, similar challenges related to DCP were identified in the nationwide survey. Resource scarcity is a significant hurdle, as adequate financial and human resources are needed to sustain efforts. There are also data protection issues that require careful consideration of how to handle data from digital interactions in order to protect the privacy rights of citizens. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of digital technology requires continuous training for officers and constant adaptation of strategies to stay ahead of emerging trends and threats.

On the basis of these findings, an outlook on the implementation of digital citizen-oriented policing at the Berlin police force emerges. The extensive implementation of DCP in various areas of police work offers the potential for real innovation within all police forces in the

Federal Republic of Germany and thus, among other things, the opportunity to modernize their services, increase efficiency and strengthen their relationship with the population. A coordinated exchange at the federal and state level will therefore help to learn from best practices in the areas covered by the DCP and thus improve efficient application.

Building on the positive experiences of other countries such as Iceland, Norway, the Netherlands and Denmark, digital community policing is to be introduced in the Berlin police force, particularly in the area of (online) radicalization prevention.

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[19] Berlin police, n.d.

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[22] Berlin police, 2023.

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[26] The term “cybergrooming” (to groom) refers to the targeted approaching of minors with the aim of sexual contact on the internet and abusing them online or offline. The term describes the targeted initiation of sexual contact with minors via the internet. In chats or online communities, the perpetrators pretend to be around the same age as children or young people or present themselves as understanding adults with similar experiences and interests. In this way, they gain the trust of their victims with the aim of manipulating them. In many cases, they get the children to send them revealing self-portraits. The photos are

then sometimes used as a means of exerting pressure on the minors to perform further acts. Some perpetrators also aim to meet the underage victims “offline” and to abuse them.

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