

Pegida in Dresden and elsewhere – more than right-wing populism?¹

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Under the acronym PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident), in October of 2014 a group of men began “walking” every Monday evening through the streets of Dresden. These events attracted their highest number, 25000 participants, in January of 2015. Xenophobic attitudes were clearly visible from the beginning but this could hardly have been sufficient reason for so many people being attracted. Most participants declared themselves to be ordinary people from the “centre” of the political spectrum. Beyond the undeniable anti-immigrant attitudes of many Pegida supporters, there seems to be a general challenge to the concept of representative liberal democracy of the type that has been successful in the 20th and early 21st centuries.

What and who is Pegida?

There has been considerable disagreement on minor issues regarding the composition of the Pegida activists and demonstrators. Unquestionably, the so-called Pegida “Orga-Team” (organisation team) originally consisted of twelve persons all of whom live in or around Dresden. They are linked by their common adherence to the local soccer club Dynamo Dresden and their participation in specific flood relief activities in 2013. According to research done by investigative journalists from the regional newspaper Sächsische Zeitung, the employment of members of the group included work in security, in facility management and in advertising.²

They initially started with a walk in October of 2014 through Dresden, with which they protested against what they perceived as a threat to social peace in Germany, namely foreigners bringing the conflicts from their countries of origin into Germany.

During the first weeks, growing numbers of people marched silently through downtown Dresden. They refused to talk to journalists; press people were actually prevented from talking to individual participants. The press nevertheless reported. This was much to the dislike of the demonstration organisers as their backgrounds were revealed and the leading figure, Lutz Bachmann, was even shown to have a criminal record.

With reports that well-known Nazi activists had joined the marches along with hooligan fans of Dynamo Dresden, finally counterdemonstrations were organised, first by churches, later by a broad alliance of collective actors such as unions, universities, colleges and research institutions, cultural institutions, museums, civil rights groups, churches, and political parties from the centre to the left.

The pressure on Pegida to declare their goals and intentions mounted until they finally produced a 19-point manifesto.³ The conglomerate of ring-wing, anti-Islamic, and very simple anti-

¹ Article was delivered as part of the project " [The Politics of Protest. Understanding political protest in Central Europe](#)" organized by the Warsaw office of Heinrich Böll Foundation in partnership with Collegium Civitas university. The Project under the academic supervision of Mateusz Falkowski PhD. from the Collegium Civitas examines recent protests in six Central European countries. Between March and October 2015 six expert seminar discussions examined protests taking place recently in following countries: Bosnia, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. Invited country experts discussed the background, causes and forms of current mobilizations. Each seminar was documented in a short "country paper", a basis of a short book summarizing our findings and proposing analytical framework.

² „Pegida persönlich“, *Sächsische Zeitung* Dec. 2, 2014, p. 3.

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1. Affirms the right of asylum for war refugees and politically persecuted people.
2. Advocates the inclusion in the German constitution of a right and duty to integration.
3. Advocates decentralised housing of refugees.
4. Suggests the creation of a central refugee agency for a fair allocation of immigrants among countries of the European Union.

establishment demands is completed by Pegida's declaratory opposition to "any kind of radicalism" and against hate speech.

With the demonstrations of December 15th and December 22nd, having again more participants, Pegida finally drew national attention. Immediately, small off-shoots of Pegida were founded in many cities in Germany, but also abroad, such as in Oslo, Norway.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that both President Gauck and Chancellor Merkel strongly advised Germany not to follow Pegida demonstrators, the numbers of the marches in Dresden continued to grow to a peak of about 25,000 marchers at the end of January. The local off-shoots elsewhere never reached anything close to the success Pegida had reached in Dresden, for two basic reasons:

In many cities, locally well-known neo-Nazis had taken the opportunity to initiate the marches, so hardly anybody beyond the usual neo-Nazis participated. Also, however, the counter-protests were much, much stronger than in Dresden. In some places, Pegida marchers were met by ten times as many counterdemonstrators, and this quickly led to the demise of these Pegida initiatives.

As much of the attention focused on the situation of refugees and foreigners in Germany, and in the state of Saxony in particular, civil society actors united within the newly founded network "Dresden für Alle" ("Dresden for all") decided upon a twofold strategy:

- (a) continuing with the counterdemonstrations,
- (b) starting active civil society support to refugees coming to Dresden in different parts of the city alongside the official city agencies in charge of dealing with the refugees.

Beyond the factual perspective, I wish to focus on a number of categories that may help the better understanding of the phenomenon and open it to comparative analysis.

The trust element: Whom do we trust?

The stability and legitimacy of any kind of government relies on the consent of the governed, and this requires a certain extent of trust on the part of the governed towards those who are in government, but also to those in other "elite" positions in varying spheres of society. It seems that Pegida supporters have lost any kind of trust in government, in elites, except for perhaps local actors they personally know and whom they don't categorise as "elite".

As Pegida supporters do not seem to trust any established institutions, many of them are very open to conspiracy theories – the actors in these theories being international business, the American or Israeli military, specific elites, and the "leftists" who have (in their eyes) taken control over essential positions in the state and media administrations.

Who are the actors and the institutions that explain how society and the world function?

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5. Demands a decrease in the number of asylum seekers per social worker from the current 200:1.
 6. Suggests modelling German immigration policies after those of the Netherlands and Switzerland and demands an increased budget for the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees to speed up the processing of applications.
 7. Demands an increase in funding for the police.
 8. Demands the implementation of all asylum laws including expulsion.
 9. Mentions zero tolerance towards criminal refugees and immigrants.
 10. States that Pegida opposes misogynistic and violent political ideology, but does not oppose assimilated and politically moderate Muslims.
 11. Supports immigration as it is in Switzerland, Canada, Australia and South Africa.
 12. States that Pegida supports sexual self-determination (opposing the "early sexualisation of children").
 13. Argues for the protection of Germany's traditionally Judeo-Christian culture.
 14. Supports the introduction of referenda as in Switzerland.
 15. Opposes weapons exports to radical and non-permitted groups, such as the PKK.
 16. Opposes parallel societies/parallel jurisdictions, for example Sharia courts, Sharia police and peace judges.
 17. States that Pegida opposes gender mainstreaming and political correctness.
 18. Indicates that Pegida opposes any radicalism, whether religious or politically motivated.
 19. Says that Pegida opposes hate speech, regardless of religion.

<http://www.menschen-in-dresden.de/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/pegida-positionspapier.pdf> (Translation: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pegida#Political_positions)

For decades, even centuries, people have belonged to some kinds of social groups – to a church congregation, to a union, to a clan, to a party, to some kind of community which may have constituted not just a second home but also provided actors who explained the world and society to individuals. These actors may have been priests or union or party leaders or local or regional newspapers. I well remember the lamentations from people who were told by their priests etc. how to vote, and how they complained that they were not free. With many of those ties loosened, people are more “free” than ever in making their choices with respect to their personal lives, but also in terms of the choices of whom they trust, who they vote for.

But to what extent are they “free”? People still need sources of information, but more than that, they need communication about how to interpret developments in society, in economics, in politics. Many people turn to diverse and very often contradictory sources of information and actors who provide interpretation.

Social media dimension

Here we arrive at the social media dimension. In their newly-felt freedom, people turn to very diverse sources of information and actors providing interpretation on the internet. This “emancipation” leads some of them to denounce established media as “Lügenpresse” (“liars’ press”) while themselves turning to rather questionable right-wing media sources such as Junge Freiheit⁴, Politically Incorrect⁵ or blu-News⁶, but also sources such as Russia Today⁷.

The success of Pegida is unthinkable without social media, Facebook in particular. From the first weeks on, just about all of their communication with their followers and the outside world was carried out on Facebook. When the leading regional newspaper refused to publish a full verbatim interview, Pegida’s leading figure Lutz Bachmann withdrew his consent to answer a number of questions and published the communication with the newspaper on Pegida’s Facebook page, giving this incident as an example of the “Lügenpresse”. Pegida’s Facebook page is also full of thousands of commenters’ diverse and in many respects contradictory opinions on politics, on society, on the media, on “the left”, on “genderism”, on just about anything they dislike about what they perceive to be modern society. Those commenters who try to differentiate between issues are insulted, their comments often deleted, and the hatred of this “community” has poured out in more than just verbal violence. It is not wholly clear, and probably never will be, to what extent those that are active commenters on Pegida’s Facebook page are in any respect representative of those who walk in the Monday night marches. There is reason to believe, however, that frequent Facebook commenters tend to be more radical than the average marcher on the streets of Dresden, especially in those weeks in the winter when Pegida was able to pull crowds of more than 10,000 supporters.

What is Pegida’s understanding of politics?

The predominant understanding of politics is something like politics as a service. As a citizen you may or may not return your vote every four or five years, and then you expect those whom you voted for to deliver directly the “services“ you ordered. For most Pegida supporters, there is a clear distinction between “us” (“normal people”, “ordinary citizens”) and “them” (politicians (presumably corrupt), members of any kind of elite). The notion of participatory democracy seems to be unknown to most of them.

The notion of “them” (elites, politicians, media people, leftists, foreigners) is also a *chiffre*, a symbol for anything they dislike, they do not understand, that is too far away from their sphere, the sphere they can grasp.

The notion of the “normal” citizen, the “centre” of society, of “common sense”

Since the pre-1990times of the German Democratic Republic , there has always been a widespread notion of a homogeneous East German society (partly in contrast to West German society, which was in various respects more heterogeneous). The idea is that “we, as normal citizens” have more or less similar interests. In this framework of thought, the “normal citizen” in the

⁴ www.jungefreiheit.de

⁵ www.pi-news.net

⁶ www.blu-news.org

⁷ www.rtdeutsch.com

“centre of society” having “common sense” stands against all different kinds of actors: politicians, the media, elites in business, Americans (sometimes Jews, but not always), Muslims, leftists, homosexuals. The notion of the “normal citizen” thus also opened the way for the employment of the old slogan from the peaceful revolution in 1989, “Wir sind das Volk” (“We are the people”) again in contrast to ruling elites.

This notion of a “normal citizen” contrasts sharply with the social research findings which show that society in East Germany has been becoming more and more diverse in recent decades in several respects: in terms of income, education, interests, political and religious perspectives; it has even become slightly more ethnically diverse. This clearly leaves open the question as to what extent East German society actually was homogeneous before 1990.

The notion of the “normal citizen” received intended and unintended support from preliminary studies by two political scientists from the University of Dresden, Prof. Werner Patzelt and Prof. Hans Vorländer. While Patzelt was more or less openly sympathetic to the notion of the “normal citizen” now expressing himself politically, only adding that this expression was in need of more sophistication (“Veredelung”),⁸ Vorländer’s research group found a greater diversity among those participating in the Pegida marches than had previously been believed. The marchers were not just the usual group of those who had walked with Nazi demonstrations in the past. Instead, by being placed in the tradition of the Monday demonstrations of 1989, the marches actually attracted quite a number of people with decent incomes, owners of small businesses or professionals with university education. However, adding up this diversity of walkers in his first widely publicised presentation, Vorländer used mathematical averages to identify a “typical Pegida demonstrator” – 48 years old, male, fairly well educated, income slightly above average. With this categorisation of a “typical Pegida demonstrator”, Vorländer actually misinterpreted the findings of his research group and thus gave unintended support to the justification of the notion of the “normal citizen” so essential in Pegida’s line of thought.⁹ Employing the notion of a “normal citizen” provided Pegida with a boost of legitimacy, and they could actually feel themselves to be representatives of the people, one body of a homogeneous people – Volkskörper” in Nazi ideology.

The idea of victimhood

The notion of victimhood has for a long time played a particular role in Dresden, and has been especially strong in the imagination of Dresdeners. With the exploitation of the bombing of downtown Dresden in February 1945 both by Nazi propaganda and by Soviet-led East German state propaganda, Dresden was portrayed as THE victim of World War II. This notion was again and again confirmed by the impression that Dresden’s regional football team was repeatedly discriminated against and by the feeling that UNESCO World Heritage status of was maliciously taken away from Dresden for the city’s decision to build an autobahn-like bridge across the Elbe river, right in the centre of a World Heritage landscape.¹⁰

Freedom of speech, political correctness, and the notion of objectivity

Most Pegida followers are convinced that there is no full freedom of speech in Germany. Certain unpopular and “true” things may not be said openly in public and in the media, they believe. What they refer to is not actually repression of speech by government actors, but a repression of the kind that means one may not say everything openly due to social pressure, which is widely termed “political correctness”. This is why many Pegida supporters do not trust mainstream media, such as public television and radio, the main national newspapers and magazines and regional dailies. They do, however, cite from those media individual incidents or articles whenever they fit into their

⁸ Werner J. Patzelt, „Die Verortung von Pegida. Edel sei der Volkswille“, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* Jan. 21, 2015.

⁹ Hans Vorländer, Wer geht warum zu Pegida-Demonstrationen? Presentation at a press conference, Jan. 14, 2015 (<http://tu-dresden.de/aktuelles/news/Downloads/paespeg>). In the later published 80-page report, this was corrected: Hans Vorländer, Maik Herold, Steven Schäller, Wer geht zu Pegida und warum? Eine empirische Untersuchung von Pegida-Demonstranten in Dresden. Dresden 2015 (http://tu-dresden.de/die_tu_dresden/fakultaeten/philosophische_fakultaet/ifpw/poltheo/news/vorlaender_herold_schaeller_pegida_studie).

¹⁰ I have further elaborated on this in Dietrich Herrmann „Warum gerade Dresden? Beobachtungen zu Staat, Zivilgesellschaft und politischer Kultur in Dresden“, Jan. 14, 2015 <https://www.boell.de/de/2015/01/14/dresden-staat-zivilgesellschaft-pegida>

framework of thinking. From those occasions when one meets Pegida supporters, or judging from the endless discussions on social networks on the internet, in particular Facebook, we can note that they claim freedom of speech for themselves but will not respect opinions different to their own. The potential of rational argument with many of them is thus really limited, and it seems that they are not ready to accept an understanding of intersubjective objectivity to be reached by rational discourse. What counts in their mind is a notion of “common sense objectivity” that need not be debated.

Reactions to Pegida in Dresden and elsewhere

The reactions to Pegida in Dresden and the rest of Germany, even in some places outside of Germany, differed markedly and to this day show a great variety. In all cities where Pegida groups took to the streets they were very often easily outnumbered, and with the exception of a few cities like Leipzig, the Pegida demonstrations quickly faded. In Dresden, however, counterdemonstrations against Pegida were not as strong in number; on December 9th, Pegida and #nopegidawere of about equal number, with around 10,000 participants each. Later on, parallel counterdemonstrations in Dresden never reached the same numbers as Pegida marches, until the first anniversary in October 2015 when around 20,000 marched for Pegida, while perhaps a slightly higher number were with the opposing “HerzstattHetze” (“Heart instead of Hatred”). Of note here are also a variety of activities, such as the symbolic cleaning actions in January (“Neujahrsputz”), the state-organised demonstration on January 10th, the privately organised concert featuring prominent performers such as Herbert Grönemeyer on January 26th and the huge activity “Dresden isst bunt” (“Dresden eats colourfully”) on the Altmarkt on June 10th.

State-oriented political culture and traditionally weak civil society

One problem in Dresden in particular is the relatively weak role civil society traditionally plays in the political life of the city and the region. A great part of the city’s population strongly adheres to the state and the government, as Dresden has a long history of being the city of the residence of princes, where practically all benefits would come from the court.¹¹ Thus, civil society-organised counterdemonstrations and activities against Nazis, but also now vis-à-vis Pegida, are – in Dresden at least – a matter for a minority.

The taboo of not cooperating with Nazis

Over the years after World War II, in West Germany a widely accepted consensus not to cooperate with any groups or individuals that were in any respect categorised as Nazi or neo-Nazi eventually developed. This consensus in West Germany was reached mainly through discourse; in East Germany it was a clear taboo decreed by the state. It was actually state doctrine that there was no Nazism in East Germany (after World War II it was presumed that all Nazis had gone to the West - though this was not in fact the case). With the peaceful revolution of 1989-90, any rules set by the East German state that were deemed political were now rejected by many people; non-existent or poor civic education left a vacuum in terms of what was acceptable and what was not in the discourse of democratic political order.

The so-called “theory of extremism” and the notion of constitutional patriotism

The dominant party in the state government of Saxony has been, and still is, the Christian Democratic Union (whose leading representatives of today were already politically active in the old regime¹², though in minor positions). In its attempt to distance itself from the old regime, it was the openly declared intention to put the “totalitarianism of the SED” on the same level as National Socialism. Taking all necessary critiques of the Stalinism of the GDR for granted, as well as the potential to do empirical comparative research on certain mechanisms of totalitarian rule, this intention seems to belittle National Socialist rule and the Holocaust, and at the same time to demonise the political order of the GDR. In post-1989 discourse, this demonising intentionally

¹¹ Cf. Herrmann, „Warum gerade Dresden?“

¹² The current Prime Minister of Saxony, Stanislaw Tillich, had been a member of the local state administration of the county of Kamenz; the current leader of the CDU parliamentary group in the Saxon parliament, Frank Kupfer, in his county had been a full-time party secretary of the CDU, which back then supported communist authorities,.

included the political heirs of the SED – the PDS and now Die Linke (The Left).

In order to support this intention, some regional scholars have now invented an “extremism theory”. According to this “theory”, within both the far left and far right there exist non-democratic, extremist groups: the NPD and Freie Kräfte (Free Forces) on the right, the autonomous Anti-Fascists and the PDS/Die Linke on the left. According to this model, there is a centre – the “normal”– which distinguishes itself from the extremes, in reality mainly in a declaratory manner.

In still applying this “theory” in everyday political discourse by calling the Linke “extreme left”, the term “extreme” is banalised and belittled. This contributes to a trivialisation of any kind of actually dangerous “extremism”.

Finally, by focusing on the groups declared to be “extremes”, attention shifts away from anything that declares itself to be “normal” or in the centre.

What gets completely lost in this kind of approach are the foundations of a democratic body politic: human rights and constitutional order– how actors position themselves in relation to individual rights, but also vis-à-vis the set of rules of a democratic commonwealth. It is therefore necessary to focus on constitutional rights and rules in determining who is to be considered to be within the democratic spectrum of our polity.

The “speechlessness of the talkative” and the need for a renewed discourse on the foundations of the body politic

When we try to sum up, what we recognise is actually more talking than ever; an abundance of talking, writing, calling, texting, posting, and an abundance of opportunities to talk. This is why I employ the term “the talkative” for this phenomenon. At the same time, we must conclude that despite all this talk, there is actually not much communication; it is only speech, in the sense that very much of this talk does not go beyond the surface; it does not address the foundations of our body politic. We must understand that there is need for a renewed broad public discourse on these foundations, a discourse by current generations reflecting the new “transformation of the public sphere” (Jürgen Habermas)¹³ through globalisation and digital social media. There is a potential for the development of a new consensus on the basic foundations of our society and body politic, which has been so aptly described by John Dewey as the formation of a “great community”.¹⁴

Update:

Until summer, the last time Pegida was able to draw a huge crowd was for the appearance of the Dutch populist Geert Wilders in Dresden in April 2015, but the approximately 10,000 people present was significantly lower than the expected 30,000. Since then, Pegida has been rotating its marches between the three major cities in Saxony – Leipzig, Dresden, and Chemnitz –and thus concentrating its supporters. In the first round of the mayoral election in Dresden, Pegida candidate Tatjana Festerling drew close to 10% of the vote and then advised her supporters to vote for the conservative liberal candidate Dirk Hilbert. Hilbert himself did not openly seek Pegida’s support, but also avoided openly attacking them. Hilbert’s victory, with a 10% margin, saved Dresden from the verdict of having elected a mayor by grace of Pegida. Shortly after this, Hilbert himself gave a clear speech attacking the racist attacks on newly organised refugee camps and also distancing himself from Pegida. Public attention thus, temporarily, to some extent to shift away from Pegida.

From September, Pegida again drew stronger crowds in Dresden every week– mostly between 4,000 and 10,000 participants. This was clearly a reaction to the so-called “Willkommenskultur” showed by thousands of Germans all over the country when great numbers of refugees arrived in Germany. After the sensational move of the German government to welcome thousands of refugees, mainly from Syria, in early September 2015, Pegida drew close to 5,000 people to its demonstration on September 7th. In other cities and even small towns, smaller demonstrations against refugees have taken place, most of them organised by more or less well-known right-wing individuals and groups. Some of these demonstrations and blockades before refugee camps have become violent, and the number of violent acts against foreigners have multiplied in recent months. This development corresponds to a radicalisation of the rhetoric at Pegida demonstrations, where the speakers have become more and more aggressively anti-foreigner and anti-Muslim.

¹³ Jürgen Habermas. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991 (first published in German in 1962)

¹⁴ Dewey, John. *The Public and its Problems*. New York: Holt, 1927.

In mid-September, Lutz Bachmann announced the founding of a Pegida party. It is rather doubtful whether Pegida activists have the experience or have acquired the skills necessary for building up and managing a party. Because Pegida is mainly limited to Saxony, the next relevant regular elections will be the Bundestag elections in late 2017 and Pegida's rhetoric is much sharper than other parties trying to attract conservative and right-wing populist votes, so it seems doubtful whether they will be able to attract enough votes to reach anything that could – in their view – be termed a success. At the same time, the right-wing AfD ("Alternative für Deutschland") party, with supporters all over Germany, will take the chance to compete in regional elections in 2016 in other states; it has good chances of success, in particular in Sachsen-Anhalt. This may give AfD the lead, but the already existing rivalry between AfD and Pegida will continue. There is little doubt, however, that right-wing populism will for the foreseeable future remain a source of unrest in Germany as other parties or groups seem unable to (re-)integrate Pegida supporters.

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