

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN GERMAN POLITICAL STUDIES

PEGIDA AND NEW RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN GERMANY

Hans Vorländer, Maik Herold, Steven Schaller



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PEGIDA and New Right-Wing Populism in Germany

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PREFACE

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Dresden, Germany

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INTRODUCTION

A development that had already taken place in Europe since the 1980s also began to emerge in Germany in autumn 2014. Even before the refugee and migration crisis in summer 2015 a protest movement entitled Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident (PEGIDA) had formed on streets and squares. Despite having started as a small group of friends it immediately developed a remarkable dynamic, mobilising thousands of participants. The PEGIDA protests rapidly received media attention, well beyond Dresden, Germany and even Europe. The rallies of protesting citizens chanting shrill slogans were met by strong reactions from those in politics, the media and counter-demonstrators. The pictures of a flag-waving crowd, demonstrating in the darkness and chanting offensive slogans were seen around the world and gave rise to fears that, in a kind of catch-up alignment with other western democracies, right-wing populism was now also able to develop political momentum in Germany.

Although PEGIDA originated in Dresden, and it was also there that it drew the most participants at its weekly demonstrations, the protest movement nevertheless regarded itself as the nucleus of a larger German and European trend. PEGIDA offshoots arose in many German cities, in other European countries and even in Australia. However, in the end they remained insignificant and did not have a lasting impact. And yet, the movement was paradigmatic for a process of political outrage, polarisation and disinhibition. PEGIDA showed how the dynamics of the mobilisation of anger and outrage could unfold, be used for political purposes, and how harsh criticism from politicians and the media can contribute to creating a spiral of mutual escalation. This escalation promoted a division of civil

society, furthered the creation of counter-publics on social networks and acted as an accelerant for the protest movement itself. At PEGIDA's rallies communicative power was gained by the purposeful occupation of public spaces. Performative techniques of symbolic staging established rituals that created loyalty and the feeling of belonging to a large community of like-minded people. Here, in a locally concentrated form, PEGIDA made visible the ferment in society, from which a clearly defined potential of support for right-wing populist politics arose throughout Germany—a potential that was later absorbed and converted into electoral successes by the party Alternative for Germany (AfD).

This was in spite of the fact that PEGIDA and the AfD initially had little in common. It was not until the events of 2015 that there were recognisable similar intentions, which were primarily defined by the resistance to “mass migration”. In the informal alliance of PEGIDA and AfD, of street and parliament, movement and party, a right-wing populist force took shape which found common ground with the rejection of immigration, mistrust of the religion of Islam, fundamental criticism of the political and media elite, the dissatisfaction with liberal and representative democracy and the fear of heteronomy. As in in other western democracies, new right-wing populism in Germany also came onto the scene, seeking to radically change society through the reactivation and redefinition of central linguistic themes, the assertion of cultural and national identity, the reclamation of a patriotic and ethnic nationalism, the restitution of sovereign statehood and the implementation of plebiscitary democracy.

PEGIDA marked the public appearance of a new type of right-wing populist movement of indignation, which did not articulate a specific protest, but instead staged a diffuse outcry against everything that could be linked with “official” politics and media. The movement's Islamophobic and xenophobic thrust as well as its mobilisation of ethnocentric and national-conservative sentiments made PEGIDA a gathering point for the situationally outraged, the politically alienated and activists from the extreme and the New Right. In the end, PEGIDA achieved little, but it changed a lot: resentment became socially acceptable. The political discourse in Germany became coarser, the protest eventually lost its inhibitions, the lines between rhetorical and physical violence became brittle.

From a contemporary historical perspective this book brings together diverse observations of PEGIDA, of the civic actions to counter it and of the mediating dialogue events, and furthermore the findings and insights

gained through the reading of hundreds of letters and e-mails as well as through countless conversations. For a more comprehensive systematic analysis we also come back to our own survey of the Dresden PEGIDA demonstrators, which was the very first empirical study of the movement, and compare its findings with those of numerous other studies. In addition, incorporated into this book are our own observations of the demonstrations, an evaluation of the coverage about PEGIDA in the national and international media, the communication observed on social networks as well as the results of the participatory observation of dialogue rounds between politicians and PEGIDA supporters. Additionally, background talks were conducted with former members of the organisational team involved with the protest events and with actors associated with these events.

In this book the development, structure and effect of PEGIDA are described and the existing empirical findings are brought together with established explanations from research into right-wing extremism and populism as well as more extensive interpretive approaches. First, in Chap. 1 there is a description of the emergence and development of PEGIDA, the contents of its demands and positions, as well as the forms its protest took on the streets and on social media. Subsequently, Chap. 2 addresses the public reactions to the demonstrations, which were characterised above all by strong condemnation. PEGIDA used these reactions in order to present itself as the victim of political and media elites and attempted to provoke them with increasingly radical slogans. The dynamic of alternating escalation that resulted gave the demonstrations media attention and high participation numbers. The relationship between PEGIDA and the existing parties on the right-wing fringe as well as New Right actors in Germany is looked at in Chap. 3, which also describes PEGIDA's contacts with other right-wing populist forces in Europe. Then, in Chap. 4, existing findings on the socio-demographic characteristics, the motivations and the political preferences of the PEGIDA demonstrators are presented and compared with insights into support for the political parties in Germany. Chapter 5 follows on from this with further findings about the political views of PEGIDA supporters and puts them in an interpretative context with research on Islamophobia, right-wing extremism, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, criticism of democracy and populism in Germany. Chapter 6 then brings together the insights gained using the most important explanatory approaches, which trace the new right-wing populism back to recent

developments in Germany, to transformations of representative democracy, but also to global economic and social developments. Finally, Chap. 7 summarises the PEGIDA phenomenon: it remains to be seen whether PEGIDA has marked the beginning of the long-term establishment of right-wing populist positions and parties in the democratic system of the Federal Republic of Germany.



The Development of PEGIDA: From a Movement of the Outraged to a Protest Ritual

The Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident (PEGIDA) represented something unprecedented in the Federal Republic of Germany. Never before had there been a right-wing protest movement that could mobilise on a massive scale and bring thousands or even tens of thousands of supporters onto the street. Hence, PEGIDA's demonstrations and rallies quickly attracted attention well beyond Germany and Europe. The origin and main location of the protest movement was Dresden, the state capital of the *Bundesland* Saxony. It was from here, starting in October 2014, that every week the same pictures went around the world, of a flag-waving and banner-holding crowd, which cleverly presented itself against a baroque backdrop.

Every Monday evening the same ritual could be observed. In a relaxed, even festival-like, yet partly tense atmosphere, thousands of people streamed into the historic centre of town. These were mainly groups of men, many middle-aged, but also married couples, young people, pensioners, as well as numerous people who appeared to belong to the hooligan or neo-Nazi scene. Influenced by the speakers the atmosphere quickly heated up. Slogans like "We are the people" (*Wir sind das Volk*), "Lying press" (*Lügenpresse*) or "Merkel must go" (*Merkel muss weg*) rang out through the night. Remarks which were xenophobic, nationalist and critical of the elites could be heard, and journalists on the sidelines were

insulted, which made their coverage even more critical. This image presented to the outside world led to the conclusion that PEGIDA was a narrow-minded, blatantly Islamophobic and xenophobic mob, publicly displaying its diffuse fears. And yet its initiators and supporters always denied that they hated foreigners and Islam. In fact, they thought of themselves as the avant-garde among the citizens, who had the courage to take justified criticisms generally shared by the population to the streets as a public protest. With this in mind, the slogan of the freedom movement from 1989, “We are the people” (*Wir sind das Volk*) was also adopted. PEGIDA believed itself to be the core of a collective German and European movement of the outraged, the new “enraged citizens” (*Wutbürger*).

The development of the protests was marked by highs and lows. Their rapid rise in winter 2014/2015 was followed by a progressive erosion of support, so that in July 2015 it seemed that PEGIDA had already come to an end. Then, the refugee crisis¹ of late summer 2015 provided the impetus for a veritable resurrection of the demonstrations, alongside which a noticeable radicalisation began. One could subsequently observe a brutalisation of the political discourse on the streets and on social media, in which the lines between rhetorical and physical violence threatened to become blurred. Since 2016 the new right-wing populist party Alternative for Germany (AfD) has achieved, at times, spectacular electoral success in elections in a number of German states, whereas the number of participants at PEGIDA events soon declined. The right-wing populist protest, it seemed, had now found its way into parliament via the AfD, whereas on the streets it had stagnated and become an increasingly weary protest ritual. Accompanied by further public quarrels among the organisers, PEGIDA’s slow decline into insignificance began.

1.1 EMERGENCE AND FIRST SUCCESSES

What presented itself in autumn 2015 as an anti-immigration movement with international ambitions had started a year earlier as a small, like-minded group of friends and acquaintances. In a Facebook group not visible to the public, established on 11.10.2014, views were exchanged

¹The term “refugee crisis” refers to the events of late summer 2015 when—particularly through Greece and the Balkan states—an ever-increasing stream of refugees reached Central Europe. Angela Merkel eventually decided to let them pass the German borders enabling some 1.2 million asylum seekers to enter the country by summer 2017.

about one's dissatisfaction with the political course of the country. The group's initiator, the trained chef and self-employed advertising entrepreneur Lutz Bachmann,² later justified the establishment of this group as a result of a demonstration by supporters of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which had recently taken place in Dresden, along with the latest reports of ethnically and religiously motivated conflicts between foreigners in German cities.³ As a matter of fact, the incidents mentioned were in the context of developments which had led to a broad political debate, not only in the traditional media, but also on social media.

Simultaneously, there was extensive reporting about the successes of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, as well as about the targeted killings shown by the group in videos, which led to a debate about possible German support for Kurdish Peshmerga militias (Leithäuser and Bickel 01.09.2014). Subsequently, on 10.10.2014, also in Dresden, a demonstration did in fact occur in which the participants advocated arms shipments to the PKK, which is banned in Germany.⁴ At the same time, already in autumn 2014, the housing of refugees was being discussed at a local level. The authorities had revealed plans to establish new accommodation for asylum seekers. According to those plans, in the Dresden area, for instance, around 2000 places were to be provided. In many affected communities resistance quickly emerged, which was voiced in local discussion rounds, local media and social networks and was frequently consolidated in protest initiatives. The target of the criticism was, above all, a seemingly authoritarian style of administration, the lack of involvement of the local population and the lack of a strategy for the housing and

²After research by journalists more details about the past of the PEGIDA founder soon came to light. Bachmann was sentenced to prison in 1998 for a number of offences, including burglaries and assault. He initially attempted to avoid imprisonment by fleeing to South Africa. After facing deportation from there, he served his sentence in Germany from 2001. After that he worked, among other things, as a bratwurst vendor and in two advertising companies (Machowecz 2015, p. 21f.).

³This was stated in an interview for the internet portal of the weekly newspaper *Junge Freiheit* (12.12.2014).—In Celle on 06.10.2014 a “mass brawl” between Kurdish Yazidis and Chechen Muslims had occurred. In the Hamburg district of St. Georg on 08.10.2014 a similar clash took place between Kurds and Salafists (Knoche 08.10.2014; Knaack 08.10.2014; Dostal 2015, p. 24ff.).

⁴Lutz Bachmann had spread footage of this demonstration on social media (Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6aFr9GVE2c>).

integration of asylum seekers (Baumann-Hartwig et al. 26.11.2014; Wolf and Llanque 08.08.2014).⁵

Against the backdrop of this mix of developments in global politics, national debates and local conflict situations in the population, a decision was made in Lutz Bachmann's Facebook group to take their outrage to the streets in a protest event. By choosing the label "Patriotic Europeans" the aim was to create the image of a middle-class initiative.⁶ Even the first public call for a demonstration in Dresden's city centre, which the PEGIDA organisers distributed among their friends and acquaintances on Facebook, was heeded by around 300 to 350 people on 20.10.2014. In the following weeks the number of participants then rose exponentially. As it turned out, the threat scenarios that were then under discussion and captured in the name "Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident" acted as an emotional catalyst for a fast and successful mobilisation of thousands of supporters (Fig. 1.1).⁷

In the wake of these successes, offshoots of the Dresden PEGIDA initiative were soon also established in other large German cities. As

⁵The problematic nature of these conflicts can be illustrated with the example of the small municipality of Perba. Only around 180 inhabitants lived in the community, without any kind of public infrastructure, such as doctors or shopping facilities, to fall back on. When the housing of 50 predominantly male asylum seekers from North Africa was ordered, protest erupted among local residents. From then on, Perba featured in headlines such as "The anger is growing" or "A village is being overwhelmed" (Scharf 20.11.2014, 17.12.2014a, 17.12.2014b).

⁶The original name of the Facebook group was "Peaceful Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident" (Friedliche Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes) (Popp and Wassermann 10.01.2015).

⁷The numbers in Fig. 1.1 were calculated by the police (from October 2014 until July 2015) as well as a group of researchers from TU Dresden. Cf. the media information from the Dresden police, accessible at: https://www.polizei.sachsen.de/de/medieninformationen_pdd.htm as well as the blog of the TU-research group, accessible at: <https://durchgezählt.org>. The counting method used by the police was not without controversy and the results were the focus of criticism in the media (Springer 24.12.2014; Keilholz 13.01.2015). The PEGIDA organisers themselves stated figures that were considerably higher in some cases. Also included in Fig. 1.1, for the purposes of comparison, are the numbers of counter-demonstrators who were mobilised in Dresden parallel to the PEGIDA events. Apart from that, there were further large-scale events in the city, where there were protests against PEGIDA. For instance, on 10.01.2015, at an event entitled "For Dresden, for Saxony—for openness to the world, humanity and dialogue in cooperation", there were approximately 35,000 people in attendance according to the event organiser, the Saxon State Chancellery. On 26.01.2015 the association "Dresden—place to be" organised the rally "Open-minded and diverse—Dresden for all" with approximately 22,000 participants. Cf. Sect. 2.2 in Chap. 2.

Numbers of participants at PEGIDA and NoPEGIDA events in Dresden

October 2014 – October 2016

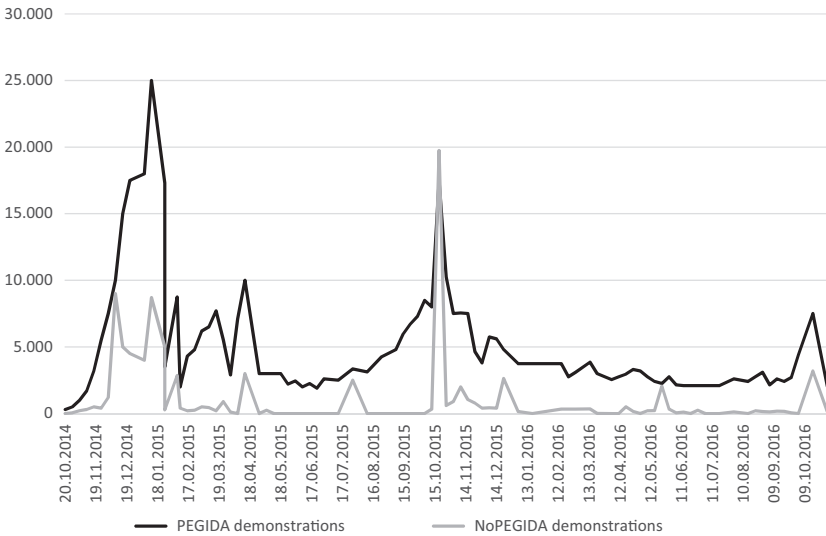


Fig. 1.1 Numbers of participants at PEGIDA and NoPEGIDA events in Dresden (October 2014–October 2016)

early as mid-November 2014 a group in Würzburg took to the streets. In December Kassel, Bonn, Munich and Düsseldorf followed, and in early 2015 Hanover, Leipzig, Kiel, Saarbrücken, Braunschweig and further cities joined. In addition to the offshoots throughout Germany, eventually even international groups emerged, which adopted the same general thrust as the Dresden movement, some even taking the name PEGIDA, for example in Great Britain, Spain, Austria, Poland, the Netherlands and even Australia (see Fig. 1.2).⁸ However, it was mainly in Dresden that PEGIDA was successful. There the Patriotic Europeans achieved rapid growth until mid-January and on 12.01.2015 ultimately reached the peak of their mobilisation with approximately 25,000 demonstrators.

⁸In Great Britain and Australia existing Islamophobic and xenophobic groups demonstrated under the label of PEGIDA. For example, on 04.04.2015 in Sydney, demonstrators from “Reclaim Australia” carried a PEGIDA banner during protests. A comparison of PEGIDA-offshoots beyond Germany can be found in Berntzen and Weisskircher (2017).



Fig. 1.2 One of the many offshoots, PEGIDA UK, with its spokesperson Tommy Robinson giving a speech at a rally in Birmingham on 6.2.2016. Image credit: Guy Corbishley/Alamy Stock Photo

One week later all PEGIDA-related events in Dresden were cancelled at short notice, because the security authorities had detected a “concrete threat”, a planned attack against a member of PEGIDA’s organisational team.⁹ Sunday, 25.01.2015, was the last time the high level of the previous weeks was close to being achieved with approximately 17,500 participants. After internal conflicts and a first split in PEGIDA’s organisational team, considerably fewer people joined the Monday demonstrations from February 2015. With the exception of 13.04.2015, when the Dutch right-wing populist Geert Wilders spoke at a PEGIDA rally in Dresden, by the end of June 2015 the weekly participant numbers had stabilised at approximately 2000 to 3000.

The number of participants at the numerous PEGIDA offshoots in other German cities remained far below the numbers in Dresden. Often

⁹This was probably Lutz Bachmann, even though it was neither officially confirmed nor denied by the security authorities.

they were gatherings of only a few hundred people. The demonstrations were often abandoned entirely after disappointing initial events or because of disputes among the local organisers (Kollenberg 06.05.2015; Crolly 16.03.2015). Among the most successful PEGIDA offshoots were two other organisations in Saxony—LEGIDA in Leipzig and PEGIDA-Chemnitz/Erzgebirge. But even this apparent success was marginal in comparison to Dresden: Leipzig only managed to get around 500 to 1000 demonstrators to regularly take to the streets in spring 2015, Chemnitz-Erzgebirge between 300 and 500, and from summer 2015 both experienced a steady downward trend (Freie Presse 19.05.2015; Döring 05.05.2015). After the number of participants dropped further, the organisers of LEGIDA finally announced the official end of the street protests on 09.01.2017, the second anniversary of the Leipzig offshoot.

In Dresden, too, the protests seemed to have passed their peak in spring 2015. After the rapid growth phase, internal disputes about the future course of the movement at the end of January 2015 led to a public row within the organisational team. In this group, up until that point, all decisions had been made based on a simple majority—from questions about the thematic orientation of speeches, or the procedure for Monday demonstrations, right through to dealing with the public and politicians. Only a fragmentary socio-demographic profile of the 12 founding members of PEGIDA can be obtained.¹⁰ At the time of the first demonstrations in autumn 2014 they were all—with the exception of the slightly younger wife of Lutz Bachmann, Vicky Bachmann—between 37 and 55 years old. At least nine of them were self-employed entrepreneurs in small businesses, mainly in the service industry. Some of them had repeatedly suffered existential setbacks in these occupations. There were only two women among the founding members. Three people had already been active in political parties before PEGIDA.¹¹ Some had professional links to the Dresden party scene, some were active among the supporters of locally

¹⁰The available information is based in part on the research of journalists (in particular Wolf et al. 02.12.2014, 22.12.2014; Wolf and Schawe 10.01.2015; Dresdner Neueste Nachrichten 15.12.2014; Machowecz 2015), but also the information and activities shared in social networks by key figures, as well as behind-the-scenes talks with individuals from the organisational team of PEGIDA or sources close to them.

¹¹One for the conservative Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU), one for the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and one for the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP).

well-known football (SG Dynamo Dresden) and ice hockey clubs (Dresdner Eislöwen). Through these and other connections¹² most of the members of the organisational team are likely to have been acquainted long before PEGIDA. The commitment and collaboration of this group of people was institutionalised with the founding of the PEGIDA association (PEGIDA e.V.) on 19.12.2014; additionally, on 05.03.2015, a “PEGIDA-Förderverein” (a PEGIDA support association) was founded, in which supporters and sympathisers were also meant to become involved through membership in order to support the work of the protest movement through membership fees and donations (Cf. Vorländer et al. 2016, p. 10ff.).

On 28.01.2015 an internal dispute culminated in a split of the Dresden organisational team. The powers more strongly aiming for a moderate, middle-class, conservative image turned their backs on the movement. Among them were René Jahn and Kathrin Oertel, two of the board members of PEGIDA e.V. The cause of the split visible to the public was the publication of text and photographic material associating Lutz Bachmann with xenophobic comments and an imitation of Adolf Hitler.¹³ Bachmann initially stepped down, but wanted to continue pulling the group’s strings in the background. However, retrospective statements made by the actors involved indicated that it was mainly underlying conflicts about the future course of the movement that had provoked the public dispute.¹⁴ The

¹²During the Elbe flood in early summer 2013, Lutz Bachmann was one of the organisers of the flood relief centres set up in the stadium of the football club SG Dynamo Dresden. Contacts were also made there which later gained in importance in the context of PEGIDA. For the dedication he showed during the flood relief Bachmann was awarded the non-monetary “Sächsischer Fluthelferorden” (an award—of a medal and a certificate—for flood relief helpers in Saxony) on 17.01.2014. At an official ceremony the Mayor of Dresden presented this award to deserving flood relief helpers on behalf of Saxony’s Minister President Stanislaw Tillich. Bachmann was among them (Fischer 09.12.2014).

¹³An older chat history, which was made public, contained entries in which Bachmann allegedly called asylum seekers “cattle” (*Viehzeug*), “trash” (*Gelumpe*) and “filthy rabble” (*Dreckspack*). Furthermore, a photo surfaced in which Bachmann was posing with a “Hitler hairstyle”. According to research by the *Sächsische Zeitung* the moustache was only added to the photo later (Wolf 16.02.2015). On 30.11.2016 Bachmann was convicted in court (Landgericht Dresden) of inciting racial hatred because of the aforementioned statements about asylum seekers (Sächsische Zeitung 30.11.2016b).

¹⁴The open outbreak of these conflicts took place at a time when individual members of the PEGIDA organisational team had begun to seek contact with political representatives and had started opening themselves up to the media. On 07.01.2015 some of the PEGIDA organisers met with the Saxon AfD parliamentary group (Saft 08.01.2015) and on