

# Pegida: Germany's anti-Islamic Street Movement

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16 January 2017

Since October 2014, thousands of people have gathered weekly in Dresden to protest against immigration and Islam which are both perceived by them as deadly threats to German society. What is the background of this unique mobilisation known as PEGIDA and what are the drivers behind its growth?

Since 20 October 2014, the East-German city of Dresden, capital of the state Saxony, has hosted rallies organized by a group named PEGIDA (German: Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes, English: Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West). While PEGIDA attracted some hundred supporters to its earliest rallies, numbers quickly peaked in late January 2015 with 25,000 attending. Up until the end of 2016, at least some 2,000 followers showed up week-on-week.

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With the number of refugees seeking refuge in Germany rising since 2013, the extent of anti-immigrant protest, often organised by extreme right groups such as the *National Democratic Party of Germany*, has increased. For example, in the Saxon town Schneeberg, mobilization brought more than 1,500 people to the streets three weeks in a row in late 2013 at the accommodation used for hosting refugees. Speakers at such rallies depicted asylum seekers as a threatening Other in xeno-racial terms by arguing that Muslims cannot adopt to 'Western civilized standards as they are not hygienic', and that there is a 'jihad of births'. Following a call for action by a group named *Hooligans Against Salafists*, 4,500 gathered in Cologne on 26 October 2014 with a significant minority clashing heavily with the local police. While these activities remained occasional events, Dresden became the location of the most successful extra-parliamentary right-wing mobilization in post-war Germany.

### **Pegida's formation and growth**

In Dresden, a group of close friends, some of them soccer fans, others already known for their racist and derogatory remarks on refugees, Muslims, and people from Turkey and Kurdistan on the Internet, started weekly rallies mid-October 2014. The initiators of PEGIDA, Lutz Bachmann being *primus inter pares* and other founding members such as Siegfried Däbritz and Thomas Tallacker, had understood that there was potential for street protests against migration, intercultural coexistence and religious diversity. Speakers again and again invoked the destruction of Germany as a result of the refugees coming to Germany, and accused the media for false reporting on the situation. They accused the government in general, but chancellor Angela Merkel especially, of being traitors to the German people. Quite often, references to '1989' were made. By referring to the mass demonstrations that contributed to the

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overthrow of the socialist regime in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) in 1989, PEGIDA tries to strengthen the belief that it would once again be possible to overthrow a political regime by mass action.

Like many social movements, conflicts related to leadership, competing concepts of strategy and framing, and narcissistic behaviour started to play a role within PEGIDA effecting its unity, capacity for mobilization and outreach. The original plan of the Dresden group to directly control the many offshoot splinter groups that appeared in many German cities did not work. By the end of 2016 there have been racist and anti-Islamic rallies in hundreds of cities and smaller towns organized by groups such as *Mönchengladbach – Get up, Commitment for Germany, Eichsfeld fights back, People's Movement North Thuringia, or Together Strong Germany*. While it is true that Dresden was the only place where this right-wing mobilization reached numbers above 20,000 with an astonishing regularity, the many other rallies also contributed to spreading racist and Islamophobic hate speech, and inflaming acts of aggression not only against those belonging to minority groups but also against social workers and volunteers who supported refugees.

## **The importance of Saxony**

Scientific [studies and surveys](#) show that there is a relevant minority of the German population holding hostile attitudes against asylum seekers, homeless people, Roma, and long-term unemployed. The exceptional mobilization capability of PEGIDA Dresden is the result of the specific political culture of the city and the state of Saxony. It consists of several narratives such as the belief about a unique and phenomenal cultural heritage, the beauty of the landscape, and urban cleanliness; and other stories that emphasize a distinct Saxon identity comprising of a special self-confidence, astuteness, and avant-garde

action. Finally, it is argued, a strong feeling of solidarity exists among Saxons, this togetherness was demonstrated by the floods in 2002 and 2013 both of which had caused major damage in the country. The *Christian Democratic Union* (CDU) that has ruled the country continuously since 1990 labels itself as the *Saxon Union* contributing to a kind of regional nationalism and solidarity.

It is also noteworthy that the CDU in Saxony belongs to the decidedly conservative part of the party regularly speaking up for a German patriotic self-awareness. Leading representatives of the CDU in Saxony have publicly blamed the same political forces, developments and ideas as being responsible for the decline of morals in the same way that PEGIDA speakers have. Not surprisingly, then, appeasing the far-right has a long tradition in Saxony going back into the early 1990s when Kurt Biedenkopf the then-Prime Minister in Saxony claimed, in light of pogrom-like violence in the Saxon town Hoyerswerda, that the citizens of Saxony are immune to right-wing extremism. Despite ten years of parliamentary representation of the neo-Nazi National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) in the state parliament of Saxony, leading politicians from the Saxon CDU like Frank Kupfer, chairman of the Christian Democratic faction in the Saxon parliament, argued that people from outside Saxony cannot understand the situation, overestimate the problem and intend to purposely discredit the political course of the regional branch of the Christian Democrats.

Another dimension which helps explain the PEGIDA phenomena is the fact that the population in Saxony played a major role in the final phase of the GDR's fall. Leipzig and, to a lesser extent, Dresden hosted Monday demonstrations in late 1989 bringing huge numbers to the streets and contributed to the downfall of the socialist regime. Public statements of the time, especially the ones given by then chancellor Helmut Kohl on the evening of 19 December 1989

contributed to a nationalist interpretation of events. In the 1990s and 2000s, Dresden also became the site of several heavily attended neo-Nazi rallies, where the Allied bombing of the city in mid February 1945 which killed some 24,000 people was framed as another kind of holocaust. This re-framing of the Allied bombing, which was actually created by the Nazi propaganda machine in the aftermath of the bombing, was used by the former GDR government in the Cold War.

Discourses of victimization by protest organizations exist in several variations in the city. Some lament the political and economic consequences of German reunification which caused fundamental structural and demographic changes especially in the more rural East Saxon regions. Open borders with Poland and the Czech Republic has changed the perception of crime. Rising levels of theft and burglary is attributed by many to the opening of German borders, which, some argue, allows foreign criminals to easily return after committing crimes on German territory. In both cases, the idea of 'Germans as victims' is given discursive empirical evidence and fosters exclusionist interpretations.

### **PEGIDA's future**

In early January 2017, the Leipzig branch of PEGIDA declared that it had decided to not hold any more demonstrations. While relieving police forces was given as the reason, media comments and political observers widely agreed that the decreasing number of participants has been the real reason behind this decision. With only a few places left in which weekly rallies are organised, albeit with not more than a hundred people taking part, PEGIDA in Dresden is still the most important site of action. Yet, the weekly meetings have become a mere ritual with the same content of the speeches, the same faces and no idea of new impetus. With Lutz Bachmann meanwhile living in Tenerife only to fly in

for the Monday rallies and growing criticism of the transparency of the use of donations, it might well be the case that PEGIDA Dresden will die a slow death toll in 2017.

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