

Pediga's Rise and Fall: A Victim of its Own Success?

The fall of 2014 in Dresden, Germany, has seen the sudden rise of the “Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the West/Occident” (Pegida), a grass-roots organization that came into the play in October, 2014 with a handful of supporters and grew into a mass movement attracting thousands. The shock that spread across Europe and the rest of the world following the carnage during the terrorist attack in Paris on January 7 provided a wave of opportunity for Pegida to advocate for their cause with greater force. On January 12 in Dresden, Pegida recorded its biggest anti-Islam demonstration yet, as around 25,000 citizens joined in (The Guardian 2015). In other German cities, however, counter-protests emerged and the Pegida protests have seen a sudden decline in attendance. This paper argues that the internal split in the leadership, ideologically incoherent support base and the anti-systemic nature of the movement are the reasons for the visible decline in Pegida's support.

Pegida Who?

Pegida originated in Dresden, Germany where it was founded in October, 2014 by Lutz Bachmann, an owner of a PR and advertising agency. Although initially only a small number of supporters participated in the protests which Pegida organized each Monday in the streets of Dresden, the rallies soon attracted enough spotlight to count the attendees in several thousands. Already in December, around 10,000 people joined the march “for the preservation of our [German] culture”, “Against religious fanaticism” and “Against religious wars on German soil,” holding posters that read “Foreigners out!” The incredible momentum gained by Pegida just in a matter of weeks puzzled not only the local observers, but also international commentators who labeled it as anti-immigration and anti-Islamist right-wing formation. German chancellor Angela Merkel too openly criticized Pegida and called on the Germans not to join the movement. In her New Year's statement, she warned that Pegida's leaders have “prejudice, coldness, even hatred in their hearts” (EU Observer 2014). In sum, the movement criticizes immigration policies in Germany,¹ especially the inflow of economic immigrants as well as what they perceive as a spread of radical Islam in Germany. Apart from the apparent narrative of anti-Islamization, Pegida stresses a number of other concerns that are, supposedly, connected to immigra-

¹ Pegida suggests that the current German model of immigration system should be revised according to the more restrictive model which is used in the Netherlands and Switzerland.

tion, such as unemployment, the abuse of social welfare system or higher crime rate. In addition, Pegida also accused the media of bias and labeled it the “lying press” (Lügenpresse), thus reviving a term that was used by the propaganda of the Nazi regime (Kirschbaum 2015), causing quite a stir in the discourse.

“United we stand, divided we fall”

Response to Pegida’s xenophobic rhetoric motivated counter-demonstrations and soon anti-Pegida rallies were held in several other cities across Germany. Anti-Pegida marches in Cologne, Stuttgart, Munster, Hamburg and Berlin attracted around 30,000 counter-demonstrators altogether (The Independent 2015). Correspondingly, several monuments in Germany including the Cathedral in Cologne turned their lights off. A march of tolerance organized by the Muslim community that took place in Berlin was also attended by Chancellor Merkel.

A week later, German police in Dresden banned the Pegida protest on Monday because of a “concrete threat” of a terror attack from the Islamic State. Things started to get more difficult for Pegida and the defeat of the leader a few days later signaled its oncoming demise. On January 21, Lutz Bachmann resigned from his position after a scandal and internal factionalism that followed resulted in a visible setback on the streets. Just as fast as the Pegida movement attracted supporters, it seemed to have suffered a sudden downfall. On February 9, roughly a month later after the astonishing crowd of 25,000 people attended the Pegida demonstration in Dresden, only a fraction of around 2,000 participants showed up. This paper argues that the lack of internal unity and discredited leadership, lack of coherence in ideology and the anti-systemic nature of the movement are the factors which caused radical decline in visible support and currently handicap Pegida’s potential to become a relevant political force in Germany.

When the walls start to crumble

One of the ultimate reasons behind Pegida’s setback is the tarnished image of its leadership. Pegida’s main figure and founder Lutz Bachmann stepped down after facing allegations including hate speech based on the leaks of a private Facebook conversation and the publication of a photograph where he

posed as Hitler. As a result of the controversy, five members of the organization's board resigned as well, including spokeswoman Kathrin Oertel, another popular face of Pegida (Deutsche Welle 2015a). On January 27, the Pegida movement officially split, which, among other things, contributed to the disenchantment of its supporters. In early February, Oertel declared that the group which separated from Pegida, now called "Direct Democracy for Europe" would organize a new series of demonstrations in Dresden, with a slightly different focus. While Oertel reassured her supporters that "the themes of asylum and immigration will still play a role 'no matter what'," the central subject of the new rallies should be a demand for a greater involvement of citizenry in the decision-making processes by means of direct democracy (Deutsche Welle 2015b).

Although Oertel's group may present a more moderate alternative to the, now severely weakened, Pegida movement, it is questionable whether it will live up to its expectations as a force that could potentially challenge Merkel's politics. Whether Pegida can rise from the ashes is also questionable at the moment. The breakthrough and fall of its central figure was a serious knock-down which, it seems, discredited not just Bachmann himself.² No letters of apology seemed to have washed out the stain that remains on the movement which had previously denied any accusations of far-right extremism. In a country where the remnants of the Nazi era remain a sensitive issue, this may have critical consequences.

Another reason for Pegida's decline is its ideologically incoherent support base. The anti-systemic character of the Monday "evening walks" attracted people from a wide spectrum of the German society as many are dissatisfied with traditional politicians, nostalgic about the past or, on the other hand, may even sympathize with neo-Nazi ideology and its proponents. According to Gesine Schwan, a German political scientist, "the common denominator among the likes of Pegida sympathizers, who are disproportionately men, is the threat of the loss of their current social status, which is usually middle class or lower middle class," (Foreign Affairs 2015). These concerns about economic standing and job security are, however, far more complex and as of now, neither Pegida, nor its successor "Direct Democracy for Europe" have formulated clear-cut policies to address them. The very fact that the movement split just adds to the frustration of the people who may have thought it could eventually

² In late February, Bachmann returned to Pegida and was reinstated as the leader of the movement. (Deutsche Welle 2015c)

become a relevant political force. One of the things it did achieve, however, is that it divided the German society and again showed how in a democratic setting, freedom of speech can easily take a radical turn. It is important that the leading political, cultural as well as religious elites condemn any signs of undemocratic rhetoric and provide a strong and convincing counter-narrative that would dismiss any attempts to tamper with and exploit people's emotions.

Another reason behind the decreasing support of the movement is its anti-systemic nature and a nationwide opposition. The terrorist attack in Paris on January 7 initially provided fertile ground for Pegida's anti-Islam catchphrases, however, it also brought up an intense debate on solidarity and understanding. The fact that the Pegida's activities resulted in the formation of an even stronger anti-Pegida movement makes it difficult for it to move forward. It has not yet shown an aspiration to become a political party, so there is a re-emerging question as to what ends it actually seeks to pursue. Secondly, Pegida's anti-systemic, extra-parliamentary status is in itself a handicap in the environment of German electoral politics. Here, a real challenge is posed by the already existing right-wing party, the Alternative for Germany (AfD). AfD initially entered politics as a single-issue party in 2013, building on Euroscepticism and opposition to European integration. By now, however, AfD has learned that to attract enough voters, it needs to broaden its focus. As a consequence, some of the topics that AfD now addresses are also anti-Islamism and anti-immigration, which, as Pegida shows, are certainly issues that seem to divide the German society. It would not be any surprise that as Pegida falls victim to its own success, AfD exploits the situation and attempts to woo Pegida's disillusioned sympathizers to bolster its own support.

What the future holds

Why is it necessary to identify the reasons behind Pegida's current decline? The decrease in the size of Pegida protesters in the streets does not mean that the thousands of its supporters who took part in the demonstrations have had a change of heart. Even though the momentum that Pegida gained since the beginning of the protests in October has by now declined, the political implications remain a challenge to the current German establishment. If not Pegida, then Alternative for Germany may try to build up its potential and become a relevant party in the country's legislatures.³ Moreover, the yet short-lived Pegida movement has already gone international. Austria, Norway and Denmark have already seen the first anti-Islam marches. In the UK, the first Pegida-inspired rally took place in Newcastle on February, 28, with around 400 attendees (Deutsche Welle 2015d). Even though Pegida in Germany is struggling to remain on the scene, it could be that its offshoots may yet "shuffle the cards" across Europe.

³ Some far right party leaders came to a realization that to enter "high politics" and legitimize themselves, they need to use a more moderate narrative that is easier for the voters to accept and identify with.

Addressing the topics of migration, asylum laws and distrust of the European institutions seems to have strongly benefited the far right parties running for seats in the European Parliament elections in 2014. The wave of self-proclaimed Eurosceptic and nationalist parties rocked the elections and correspondingly, their support at the country level continues to flourish. As it appears, these parties have successfully responded to the public demand of the electorate which has gradually become more immune to the populist rhetoric of right-wing extremist groups which deliberately seek to make their way into mainstream politics. Former outcasts are now gaining recognition and formalizing their activities aimed at winning seats in both national and European legislatures. However, although the political manifestos of these formations usually provide easy and radical solutions that certainly appeal to the embittered citizens, they lack viable and systemic policies that would work in the long-term. Pegida as we knew it when it was in the limelight in the late 2014 and early 2015 may slowly die out and be forgotten, but it already managed to make thousands of people question the current political establishment.

If the growing extremist tendencies in Germany and across Europe are not addressed and mitigated in the near future, the skeptical electorate will continue to cast its protest vote in favor of the party that promises to make their problems go away faster. Rather than to spend time and energy on blaming the right-wing extremist parties, the mainstream politicians, while still in power, should focus on formulating a clear strategy to reframe people's perceptions and respond to their fears and insecurities. This can be done through systemic cooperation across the political spectrum while engaging relevant non-governmental stakeholders both nationally and internationally. Most importantly, however, the leading elites need to acknowledge that xenophobia, group enmity and intolerance remain the most urgent issues in our society and need immediate attention.

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