NEW PERSPECTIVES IN GERMAN POLITICAL STUDIES

PEGIDA AND NEW RIGHT-WING POPULISM IN GERMANY

Hans Vorländer, Maik Herold, Steven Schäller

New Perspectives in German Political Studies

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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.