



# How Do Movements Survive? Far-right PEGIDA as a Protest Ritual

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## The PEGIDA Puzzle



### Puzzle:

Far-right PEGIDA is still on the streets at a weekly or bi-weekly rhythm and celebrates anniversaries, despite what seems to be scarce financial, socio-organizational, human, and moral resources and the related (?) lack of other forms of protest

### Research question:

Why did Dresden-based far-right PEGIDA survive over nearly six years despite low group cohesion and scarce resources?

### Aims of the research:

1. Understand (explain?) PEGIDA's 'strange survival'
2. Develop the concept of 'protest ritual' and make it fruitful for explaining movement persistence



## Literature Review & Research Gap

### Literature Review

- Research teams: Vorländer, Herold & Schäler 2015, 2016, 2018; Rucht et al. 2015; Patzelt 2015; Geiges, Marg & Walter 2015; Rehberg, Kunz & Schlinzig 2016; Heim 2017
- Topics in focus: ideology, socio-political profile of the demonstrators, conditions of emergence, societal and political reactions, impact on German political system
- Methodologies: both quantitative and qualitative – face-to-face interviews, online surveys, content analysis of speeches and social media posts, media analysis
- Issues: Partially invalid results due to unresponsiveness of demonstrators (Reuband 2015; Teune and Ullrich 2015)



### Gap & Theoretical Approach

- Identified research gap: Explanation for the persistence of PEGIDA + Explanation for PEGIDA's use of culture as a resource
- Semiotic and symbolic approach(es) to politics (Swidler 1986; Gamson 1988; Kubik 1994; Wedeen 2002; Kubik & Aronoff 2013), specifically:
  - Expressive action theory (Rucht 2003; Klandermans 2013)
  - Narrative and framing theory (Benford & Snow 2000; Polletta 2006)
  - Emotion theory (Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta 2001)
  - Performance theory (Alexander 2006; Eyerman 2006)
- Basic claims: Culture provides a 'tool kit' of resources (symbols, rituals, narratives, myths) + political actors have agency to choose



## Theoretical Approach: Protest Ritual

**Anthropology:** Rituals in religion and 'archaic' societies, e.g. initiation rites

- Rituals are “particular modes of action” (Durkheim 1995, 34), specifically “rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with **sacred things**” (in contrast to “profane things”) (Durkheim 1995, 38)
- Rituals as key mechanisms in the processes of **constituting society** as such in the context of liminality and *communitas* (Turner 1991)

**Political Science:** Rituals in politics, e.g. presidential inaugurations, national day parades

- Political rituals as “**symbolic** behavior that is socially **standardized** and **repetitive**” (Kertzer 1988, 9)
- “... ritual is an integral part of politics in modern industrial societies; it is hard to imagine how any political system could do without it” (Kertzer 1988, 3)
- “... ritual constructs a historic form of **legitimacy**, an image of the elected person which is reflected, in inevitably distorted form, in the mirrors of the mass media” (Abeles 1988, 398–399)

**Social Movement Studies:** Rituals in protest, e.g. May Day demonstrations

- Protest rituals are “all the regularly occurring symbolic performances staged by social movements in the public sphere with the manifest purpose of influencing authorities, public opinion and/or movement participants”, and which “might also be performed for **expressive**, and not just for purely instrumental, purposes” (Casquete 2006a, 47)
- “depending on the specific case, the **creation of inner cohesion** may be a by-product of the protest ritual or, rather, its main purpose” (Casquete 2006b, 287)



# Methodological Approach

## Literature

- Qualitative-interpretive methodology (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow 2012)
- Ethnographic approach to politics and social movements (Kubik & Aronoff 2013; Balsiger & Lambelet 2014; Brodtkin 2017)
- Ethnographies of far-right activists, movements, and parties (Blee 2002, 2007; Bellè 2016; Pasięka 2019)
- (Some) insights from virtual ethnography (Hine 2017) and 'patchwork' ethnography (Güzel et al. 2020)



## My Application

- Method: **participant observation** of approx. **20 PEGIDA** public protest events, both on the streets of Dresden and online (YouTube) during 'lockdown', from **fall 2019 until spring 2020**; tendency towards low involvement of researcher ('**observing participant**'); semi-structured observation, paying attention to structural, behavioral, content, and symbolic elements
- Focus: culture and symbolism in PEGIDA's public protest
- Aim: thick description of the protest event as symbolic action, insight into speech and meaning 'in action' (Geertz 1973)



## Results: Standardization & Repetition of Protest

<b>STRUCTURES AND PROCEDURES</b>	<b>Event types</b>	Regular events (street demonstrations) & Special events at anniversaries, Christmas (static rallies)
	<b>Organizers</b>	Lutz Bachmann, Wolfgang Taufkirch, Siegfried 'Sigggi' Däbritz + 'Ines' + X
	<b>Time and timing</b>	2 hours on early Monday evenings at weekly or bi-weekly rhythm
	<b>Space</b>	Iconic squares in the historically reconstructed city center of Dresden
	<b>Procedure</b>	Introduction – speech – march – main speeches – end
	<b>Distribution</b>	Announcement during event and on social media around 2 weeks before event, for special events earlier
<b>ACTORS AND BEHAVIORS</b>	<b>Organizers</b>	Approx. 12 people, professional habitus, relative distance to participants, down-to-earth approach
	<b>(Guest) speakers</b>	Less than 10 people, professional habitus, relative distance to participants, partially 'star' approach
	<b>Demonstrators</b>	1,000-3,000 people, discipline (concentration, silence, marching, etc.), little interaction, relatively static
	<b>Counter-demo's</b>	100 people, concentration on main event, much interaction
<b>CONTENTS AND CULTURE</b>	<b>Speeches</b>	Political analysis and critique, including hate speech
	<b>Music</b>	Folkloric songs, PEGIDA-"anthem", German national anthem
	<b>Decorum</b>	Flags, placards, hats, flyers, info material, etc. displaying political and historical symbolism

## Results: Symbolic Density in Protest



- Some unique symbolism
  - Logo
  - Anthem
- Political symbolism
  - German flags
  - German anthem
- Historical symbolism
  - '1989'
  - 'German resistance'
- Far-right symbolism
  - 'German resistance'
  - Lambda

PEGIDA's five-year anniversary , Dresden, 20 October 2019

## Results: Group Cohesion and Constitution



Constitution of  
'PEGIDA' on the streets  
via

- Construction of group identity through joint action
- Construction of collective action frame as “legitimate resistance against an illegitimate regime”
- Construction of collective memory through 'PEGIDA' as *lieu de mémoire*
- Sacralization of protest

“Widerstand!” (Resistance!) PEGIDA’s Christmas event, Dresden, 15 Dec. 2019



## Theoretical Contribution (?)

### (Preliminary) theorization

Conceptualization of 'protest ritual':

*Protest rituals are highly-structured, standardized, and symbolic group practices with dramatic and (quasi-)religious features, which are repeatedly staged by an oppositional collective actor in public.*

Theorization of causal relationship between 'protest ritual' and movement survival:

*Protest rituals serve as a cultural resource for movement mobilization and persistence by constituting the collective actor as such in public.*



### 'Lockdown' as confirmation?

Translation of the offline protest ritual into the virtual realm, including procedures, contents, and symbolism



Virtual event,  
April 2020



# Open Questions

## On theory:

- What is the value of the working definition of ‘protest ritual’? How to better tease out the specificities of the concept (e.g. “negative pole” (Goertz 2006))?

## On methodology:

- How to convince scholarly and public audiences of the trustworthiness of interpretive research using an ethnographic approach?
- Which evidence would show that PEGIDA’s public protest should be understood as strategic action rather than expressive action?

## On PEGIDA:

- To what extent does ritualized discursive violence (esp. towards counter-demonstrators) play a role in sustaining PEGIDA?