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 & Schäller 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; Brodkin 2017)
- Ethnographies of far-right activists, movements, and parties (Blee 2002, 2007; Bellè 2016; Pasieka 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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structures and Procedures</th>
<th>Event types</th>
<th>Regular events (street demonstrations) &amp; Special events at anniversaries, Christmas (static rallies)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizers</td>
<td>Lutz Bachmann, Wolfgang Taufkirch, Siegfried ‘Siggi’ Däbritz + ‘Ines’ + X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time and timing</td>
<td>2 hours on early Monday evenings at weekly or bi-weekly rhythm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Space</td>
<td>Iconic squares in the historically reconstructed city center of Dresden</td>
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<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>Introduction – speech – march – main speeches – end</td>
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<tr>
<td>Distribution</td>
<td>Announcement during event and on social media around 2 weeks before event, for special events earlier</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors and Behaviors</th>
<th>Organizers</th>
<th>Approx. 12 people, professional habitus, relative distance to participants, down-to-earth approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Guest) speakers</td>
<td>Less than 10 people, professional habitus, relative distance to participants, partially ‘star’ approach</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrators</td>
<td>1,000-3,000 people, discipline (concentration, silence, marching, etc.), little interaction, relatively static</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Counter-demo’s</td>
<td>100 people, concentration on main event, much interaction</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<th>Contents and Culture</th>
<th>Speeches</th>
<th>Political analysis and critique, including hate speech</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Folkloric songs, PEGIDA-“anthem”, German national anthem</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Decorum</td>
<td>Flags, placards, hats, flyers, info material, etc. displaying political and historical symbolism</td>
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</table>
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?