Resisting Leftist Dictatorship?

Memory Politics and Collective Action Framing by Populist Far-right PEGIDA in Dresden

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ESR04 The Politics of Memory in the Post-socialist City

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Rationale

"by concentrating on the symbols and figural language that refer to cultural memory as it is seen by the radical right, we may understand better the hidden logic behind its ideology, as well as the emotional and aesthetic appeal that it obviously has for many people"

Kuisma Korhonen (2020), "Politics of Fire: The Commemorative Torch Rally of the Finnish Radical Right", *European Politics and Society* 21(3): 309

Rationale: Gaps & contributions

Research gaps	Contribution
Limited explanatory potential of economist and behavioral approaches (Norris & Inglehart 2019)	Cultural approach (Aslanidis 2020, Rensmann 2017)
Missing link between memory, history and the populist far right (Couperus & Tortola 2019)	Focus on memory and history (Korhonen 2020, Kotwas & Kubik 2019)
'Western' bias of scholarship on populism & the far right (Castelli Gattinara 2020)	Geographical focus on post-communist eastern Germany (Kubik 2018)
'Electoralist' bias of research on the far right (Castelli Gattinara 2020)	Focus on grassroots actors in line with 'localist turn' in populism research (Chou et al. 2021)

Research strategy

- Research design
  - ➢ Case study of an instance of grassroots populist far-right memory politics, namely the protest group PEGIDA from Dresden, eastern Germany

Case study: PEGIDA in Dresden

Overview

- "Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident" (PEGIDA)

- Emergence in the city of Dresden, region of Saxony, eastern Germany, in 2014

- Regular demonstrations for >7years, including during COVID-19 pandemic and "lockdown"

- In 2019-20: <10 leading activists; <2,000 participants (mostly middle-aged men)

PEGIDA five-year anniversary demonstration, Dresden, 20 October 2019, ©Sabine Volk

Significance

- Largest and most sustained instance of far-right protest in reunited Germany

- Established member among German/European far-right network

- "critical case" (Snow 2013)
    - ➢ Only cultural resources
    - ➢ Set within "unified memory regime" (Art 2014)

- Strength of populist far right in eastern Germany, particularly in Saxony (Weisskicher 2020; Yoder 2020)

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- Theoretical approach
  - ➤ Conceptualization of memory politics as "political uses of memory", emphasizing the semiotic strategies adopted by political actors as well as the collective action frames based on these strategies

Theory: Grassroots politics of memory

Political science

"Politics of memory"

- Politics of memory as an instrument for political actors to achieve present needs (Kaasik-Krogerus et al., 2020; Kubik & Bernhard, 2014b; Mink & Neumayer, 2013)

- Focus on the positional and cultural/semiotic "strategies that political actors employ to make others remember in certain, specific ways and the effects of such mnemonic manipulations" (Kubik & Bernhard, 2014a, p. 7)
  - ➢ Adoption of specific political-cultural identities
  - ➢ Use of particular ideological themes which resonate with the available cultural repertoire in a given political context
- ➢ But: Focus mostly on institutional & party actors

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Social movement studies

"Movement-memory nexus" (Daphi & Zamponi 2019)

- Movements *about* memory (memory agents): Aim to change official memory politics (Wüstenberg 2018)

- Memory *in* movements: Memory as "a cultural resource out of which activists draw symbols and ideas" (Kubal & Becerra, 2014, p. 872)
  - ➢ Framing of collective action
  - ➢ Adoption of specific political-cultural identities (della Porta et al. 2018)

➢ Grassroots politics of memory as "uses of memory" in collective action framing

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- Methodological approach
  - ➢ Triangulation of interpretive research methods: Ethnography, frame analysis, critical discourse analysis

Methodology: Triangulation of interpretive methods

Data generation

"Patchwork" ethnography (Günel et al. 2020)

- Participant observation of 10 PEGIDA demonstrations in Dresden, 2019-20

- Virtual participant observation of 6 virtual PEGIDA events, spring 2020

- Ongoing virtual observation of uncounted PEGIDA demonstrations, 2020-22

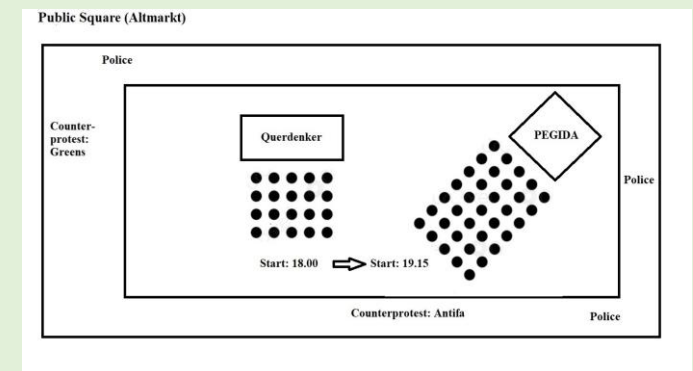- Social media analysis (PEGIDA's website, YouTube channels, Telegram, …)

Data analysis

Combination of frame analysis and (critical) discourse analysis (Lindekilde 2014; della Porta et al. 2018), particularly suited to study populist far-right discourse & rhetoric (Aslanidis 2020; Wodak 2021)

- Frame analysis (Snow et al. 2004)
  - ➤ Focus on the uses of memory in the construction of collective action frames

- Critical discourse analysis (Reisigl & Wodak 2009)
  - ➤ Focus on the uses of memory in the construction of in-group and out-group(s)

Corpus
- Fieldnotes, jottings, sketches
- Photographs and video recordings
- Social media communication
- Demonstration "memorabilia"

Findings (1/3): Strategic uses of the past

Historical references & mnemonic symbolism of:

- **1989-90 East German anti-communist "Peaceful Revolution"** which contributed to the demise of the communist regime of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR)

- Centrist and Catholic conservative **anti-Nazi resistance** circles around Hitler-attacker Claus von Stauffenberg

- 16th century **Protestant Reformation** of the Roman Catholic Church, in particular in connection with the Catholic monk and church reformer Martin Luther

- German and European **intellectual history** writ-large

➢ What is the sense behind these seemingly random historical references?

Placard at PEGIDA demonstration, Dresden, 20 Jan 2020 ©Sabine Volk

"Who wants to read in the future must browse the past. (André Malraux)"

Findings (2/3): Populist collective action framing

- Master frame:
  - ➢ Framing of PEGIDA's protest as "democratic resistance against totalitarianism/dictatorship"

PEGIDA mobilization poster Aug. 2021

"Protect civil rights & democracy & constitution!"

PEGIDA mobilization poster Oct. 2021

"7 years PEGIDA, 7 years resistance"

Findings (2/3): Populist collective action framing

- Master frame:
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- Diagnostic frame:
  - ➢ Framing of the political system of contemporary Germany as a dictatorship by historical analogy with the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Nazi Germany

PEGIDA-leader Lutz Bachmann, Dresden, 17 Feb 2020:

"The best example [for the return of the GDR] is the contemporary observation of several democratically elected parliamentarians by this *Stasi* 2.0, called *Verfassungsschutz*. Again, so-called personal records are compiled. All of this happened already twice in German history, but obviously nobody has learned anything."

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- Prognostic frame:
  - ➤ Framing of PEGIDA's protest as Germany's last chance to return to full democracy by historical analogy with previous civil rights activists and peace movements

In 2014, a resistance movement grew again in East Germany – in Dresden. For already three years, critically of the government and Islam, it opposes a government that, like in GDR-times, continuously decides against the majority of the people. The Merkel-regime has appropriated the past socialist structures, the people [*Volk*] has to function, submission to the authorities is desired, also gladly in the voting booth. This form of politics has worked for twelve years, the people has diligently financed two expensive and unnecessary financial crises as well as the exit from nuclear energy. Yet, we opt out of the 'refugee crisis', which threatens our economy, our culture, and our future! PEGIDA goes ahead in these times and, just like 28 years ago, it looks like a regime will be toppled for the second time within one generation. We are the people!

From www.pegida.de, 8 Nov 2017

Findings (3/3): Populist far-right group construction

- In-group:
  - ➤ PEGIDA as reincarnation of former resistance fighters

Anti-Nazi "Wirmer-flags" at PEGIDA demonstration, 20 Oct 2019 ©Sabine Volk

Findings (3/3): Populist far-right group construction

- In-group:
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- Out-groups:
  - ➢ The 'elites' as totalitarian by historical analogy with leaders of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) and Nazi Germany

Placard, 17 Feb 2020 ©Sabine Volk

"Turn in 1989? Error!" + Visual analogy Merkel, mainstream parties with "red socks" that hide "Islam"

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- In-group:
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  - ➢ The counter-demonstrators as 'leftist-green fascists' by historical analogy with Nazism

"Anti-fascist protection wall", 17 Feb 2020
©Sabine Volk

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  - ➤ (Muslim) immigrants as violent war-mongers through references to German and European intellectual history

Placard 20 Oct 2019 ©Sabine Volk

"Martin Luther: Islam did not get so far with sermons and marvels, but with the sword and murders"

Discussion: Populist far-right memory politics

Memory politics & ideology

Populist & far-right ideational elements dovetail in PEGIDA's discourse:

- Antagonistic logic of populism
  - ➢ Accounts for how PEGIDA arranges seemingly random historical references into the consistent master frame of 'resistance against dictatorship'

- Inequality doctrine of far-right ideology
  - ➢ Shapes the construction of in-group and out-groups
  - ➢ Sheds light on staunch "anti-leftism"

Memory's constitutive role

"When arranged in deliberate sequences and incorporated into broader mobilization frameworks, historical citations […] can prompt constituencies to assume responsibility for history itself"

Thompson, 2020, p. 545

Memory as a "cultural resource" shapes populist far-right politics, especially in the context of scarce resources:

- Explains emergence of protest

- Accounts for survival of protest due to collective identity construction

Concluding Remarks

Explanatory potential of cultural & interpretive approaches:

- The study of "strategic uses of memory" allows for novel and nuanced interpretations of populist far-right ideology

- Memory as a cultural resource constitutes populist far-right protest politics

Broader significance of the case study:

- PEGIDA as exemplary for further actors in the German far-right scene, e.g. AfD, Identitarians, etc.

- Findings foreshadow controversial mobilization of memory in "anti-lockdown" protest across Germany during the COVID-19 pandemic

Now available open access in *European Politics and Society*, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058756

Thank you for your attention!

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