

SHOULD PEGIDA CONCERN US?

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The distinction between *us* and *them* is far from being new; the *stranger*, the *foreigner*, the *other*, these are terms which serve as archetypes and help define a group of individuals. The *other* provides contrast, showing one who he is *not*, thus aiding in the formation and delimitation of the self. It was repeated throughout history that the *other* has to be bad and is generally endowed with all the negative connotations, therefore allowing the self to shine – and to deeply dislike the *other*. It is a common situation – even nowadays – to feel animosity towards another individual or group of individuals because they represent the *other*. And as much as Europe prizes itself with its ideals of cohabitation and tolerance, the reality is far from ideal. The far/right extremism still holds its appeal and has its supporters, despite what it conveys. There is almost a consensus regarding reactions against such organizations and their views, which are incompatible with the modern society and its principles – nonetheless, they have their followers and their voices are being heard.

Europe has a (dis)honourable tradition of rallying against the *other* – of course, this does not apply to all European citizens; still, such groups are a reality and are becoming more frequent in the past few years. The rise in popularity of parties with far-right views is perceived as a consequence of the financial and economic troubles and of the unsuccessful multicultural politics of the last decades. Political parties gained more and more support, both on a domestic level (Hungary would serve as the most representative example) and on a larger European scale, with Eurosceptics and even extremists being part of the European Parliament. In the last couple of months, the fight against the *other* was linked with Pegida, a German group that stands for the preservation of Western culture.

Pegida, an acronym for “Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes” (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West), is not only a new presence in the European society; it is also quite different from traditional far-right organization, being aimed at the actions of the *other* and at the Government. Founded in October 2014 as a reaction to a rally of the Kurdistan’s Workers Party (PKK) supporters from Dresden, it began as nothing more but a Facebook group, where the leader, Lutz Bachmann, a PR agent, could freely express his concerns about the future of the West. At first, the issue was the illicit activity of the PKK’s supporters, directly linked with funding and supplying weapons and ammunition for the main organization. As a response, Lutz Bachmann initiated his first Monday demonstration, where he was joined only by the few supporters he managed to gather in such a short time, but as word spread and the press covered the story of yet another anti-immigration group, more and more people adhered to Bachmann’s initiative.

The idea of the Monday peaceful demonstration is reminiscent of similar protests that took place between 1989 and 1990 in East Germany, which were aimed against the Government of – then – the German Democratic Republic. Back in September 1989, the main focus of the protest were to demand liberties considered normal, like the freedom to travel and to visit other Western countries and the right to democratic elections. The main motto of the people was “Wir sind das

Volk!” (“We are the people!”), a direct reference to their demands regarding the democratization of society. The marches were held every Monday evening, until March 1990, when the first truly democratic elections were organized, thus contributing to the reunification of Germany. What is the link between the revolutionary, but quiet demonstrations from back in the day and the Pegida marches of the present?

As opposed to other far-right and xenophobic groups, which indulge in acts of violence from time to time, Pegida organizes peaceful walk-like demonstrations, where the people carry banners and chant their requests. By choosing Monday evening for their demonstration, the link with the 1989-1990 demonstrations is established – they even use the idea of being not just people, but *the people* – although one of their most successful rallies, counting 25 000 people, less than 5% of the population of Dresden. In terms of the population of Germany, this adds up to less than a percent – far less.

In December last year, the group applied for the statute of a NGO, after being legally registered by the authorities of Dresden. Their impact is considered to be growing, as similar groups are being established in other German towns – Darmstadt has *Dagida*, Frankfurt has *Fragida*, Bonn has *Bogida*, etc. On January 21, Lutz Bachmann resigned from Pegida after some derogatory and xenophobic material he posted on Facebook became public. In the incriminating posts, he referred to immigrants as “trash” and “cattle”. Not only that, but a photo depicting him with the signature haircut and moustache shaped of Adolf Hitler, accompanied by the commentary “Er ist wieder da” (He’s back), was also made available for the public. As a response to this, Bachmann declared that his private conversations should remain private, and that the picture was taken at his hairdresser and that it was linked with Timur Vermes’ satirical novel “Look who’s back”, that presents the imaginary adventures of Hitler in present day Germany. Nonetheless, the Dresden state prosecutor opened an investigation on the allegation of incitement to popular hatred. Later the same month, Kathrin Örtel and four other important members of Pegida resigned. Nonetheless, the group still plans their weekly demonstrations and their social media accounts are still active.

Any reasonable talk about such a group should include the discussion of their manifesto; Pegida published theirs in December 2014 in the form of a position paper with 19 programmatic points and revised it a month later. Some of the ideas presented in this document are far from being extremist in content, but rather the expression of Western ideals, such as: “Pegida stands for the right of asylum for war refugees and people politically and religiously persecuted”, “Pegida stands for resistance against a misogynistic and violent ideology, but supports the integrated Muslims living in the community”, “Demands an increase in the founding of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees to speed up the processing of applications”, “Stands for the creation of a centralized office for the distribution of immigrants throughout the member states of the EU”, “Supports sexual self-determination, in contrast to the early sexualisation of children”, “Opposes the export of weapons to unconstitutional and illegal organizations, such as the PKK”, “Opposes any form of radicalism, such as motivated by politics of religion”, “Pegida opposes hate speech, regardless of religion” (These last three points were excluded from the programmatic document in January, this year). Other ideas are more controversial: “Mentions zero tolerance against delinquent asylum seekers and immigrants”, “Stands for the preservation of the Judeo-Christian-based Western Culture”, “Pegida is against this crazy *gender mainstreaming* and the already almost obsessive gender-neutrality backed up by *political correctness*” (later excluded);

even the idea of the opposition towards parallel jurisdictions, such as Sharia courts can be perceived as controversial, given the example of the UK (idea later excluded).

They also bring up the idea of advocating the *duty* of being integrated into basic German law, which would be a fair request from a liberal perspective on multicultural politics, and somehow follows the idea of the obsessive political correctness that doesn't always work to the benefit of everybody. On the other hand, such ideas as "no religious fanaticism or religious wars in our country" seems to gather more and more supporters, described as "average working men and women", as Bachmann describes Pegida's followers. Not only did the group distance itself from any right-wing extremists, but no such people are known to attend any of their rallies.

How is Pegida different? They presented a milder alternative for people who are concerned by the growing religious extremism in Western countries, without openly targeting all immigrants or Muslims. Pegida claims to have nothing against immigration or different religions and contextualize the idea of the Christian component of Germanic culture in a rather historic fashion. Their peaceful rallies, reminiscent of the '89-'90 East German Monday Demonstration, fuels sympathy even more; so does linking their actions against the extremists, but coming up with alternatives and suggestion for immigrants and not openly targeting the average Muslim. It seems Pegida found a niche-market in the German political life and are exploiting it to their advantage. They are very close to their followers and use the social media to their advantage (even changing the usual day for the demonstrations because many of the attendees expressed their desire to go to a concert on Monday evening); they capitalized on the recent Paris attacks to show the dangers of the Islamisation they so patriotically warn all of us against. Simply by not calling themselves "Patriotic Europeans against the *Muslimisation* of the West" they managed to draw a clear line between the average Muslim, who poses no danger, and the religious fanatic with terrorist inclination – and nobody likes terrorists! Of course, as the prudent German media pointed out, the line is rather thin and many of their followers might not even make a clear distinction between the two groups. The comparisons between Pegida and neo-Nazi or other extremist groups was inevitable – and Pegida was quick to disprove any ideological link or involvement with such organisations. Pegida was created and promoted as a group targeted at extremist behaviour which endangers society as a whole, is more "people-friendly" and tries to cater to their target audience. The official Facebook page has more than 150000 "likes" and their Twitter account has over 4000 followers. Their idea has launched multiple similar groups across not only Germany, but across Europe – this means there's something about the ideas they promote that resonates with (some) people. I tend to believe it is linked with the manner in which they promote their actions and the idea of moderation. The "bad guy" they oppose is not the generic *other*, but the universally accepted evil-doer; by referencing basic law, principles linked with liberal multicultural policy-making and proposing legal measures which come to aid the *normal* immigrant, their family and their children – and help them better integrate themselves in the European communities –, Pegida speaks to the what they call "normal" people that don't manifest traditional strong xenophobic tendencies. Is there more to their association than peaceful marches? The problem could easily degenerate into a full-scale hate-fuelled extremist group, as some officials boldly announced. But for the moment, their commitment to their public and to their cause makes them very appealing to a section of the population.

Should such a movement concern us? The core idea of the group speaks about a general problem that concerns many Europeans – radicalism and it creates; simply by opposing the universal "boogeyman" in such a friendly and open manner, Pegida won many supporters. Some say that

even the mildest stance against another group of people should concern Europe, while others would point out that nobody is “for” radicalism. What should serve as a concern for the people is the way in which other can serve as a subject of manipulation – if Pegida opposes terrorism and nothing more and their followers stand for the exact same ideas, then the issue is not as stringent; but what is this peaceful group slowly shifts into a more darker, hate-fuelled territory and starts preaching against all immigrants and all Muslims, and their many followers condone these actions and start acting accordingly? The situation is indeed special – unlike far-right groups, Pegida has the support of many others that didn’t directly join them, but would side with them in the right context. The authorities were cautious regarding the way to tackle Pegida – making them the enemy might work to their advantage and boost their ranks. Still, the creation of such a group shouldn’t go unnoticed and their actions should be closely observed. Only the development of the situation itself will tell if Pegida was a “gateway” group or nothing more but a group of concerned citizens, brought together by social media.

To better observe Pegida’s activity, I recommend checking the official Facebook page; it is more than a source of links to articles documenting their actions, but it serves as an insight to the way the members relate to the German society. The manifesto can be found following this [link](#) (German only).