

German Media and Politicians Promote Right-wing, Anti-Muslim Pegida Movement

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Throughout Europe, there is a concerted campaign to legitimise the most reactionary forces, as the ruling class seeks to promote anti-Muslim racism to justify war abroad and attacks on democratic rights at home. In Germany, this has taken the form of the elevation of the right-wing, chauvinist Pegida movement.

"We are Dresden," read the title of Reinhard Vesper's lead article in the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) on Monday. The article addressed the decision by police to cancel a demonstration by Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West) that had been scheduled to take place that same day in the capital of the German state of Saxony.

"Should we replace the slogan 'I am Charlie' with 'We are Pegida'?" Vesper asked. Answering his own question, he said, "The same thing goes for the initiators of Pegida and for the Dresden demonstrators as for the satirists of *Charlie Hebdo*: The attack on their right to free expression is an attack on all of us."

Vesper's colleague Jasper von Altenbockum declared the next day in the same newspaper that democracy had already suffered a defeat before the demonstration had been forbidden, because "respectable supporters of Pegida had been declared fair game for democratic 'culture.' "

This campaign by the FAZ represents a new stage in its encouragement and support for the Pegida movement. With the phrase "I am Charlie," the terror attacks on the editorial staff of *Charlie Hebdo* have been exploited in order to defend the newspaper's anti-Muslim campaign in the name of "freedom of expression." Now, a supposed terror threat is being used in order to make the racist and extreme right-wing Pegida appear presentable.

This casts more than a little suspicion on the terror warning itself. On Sunday, the Dresden police announced that all demonstrations in the city would be forbidden the next day. The supposed existence of concrete threats against Pegida by Islamic terrorists was used to justify the decision. The police did not provide any further details.

It later emerged that the organisations associated with Pegida had reached an agreement with the police to call off the demonstrations. According to an account published by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, this decision was based on a single Twitter post that vaguely threatened Pegida organiser Lutz Bachmann, along with an unspecified piece of information provided by a foreign intelligence agency. The newspaper based its report on the claims of a high-ranking security official who took part in a conference call with Saxony's interior ministry.

According to the same source, neither the Common Terrorism Defense Center (GTAZ), which includes representatives of four security agencies, nor the German Federal Police had recommended forbidding the demonstrations. "In the end, Dresden decided," the security official said. "On this basis, the demonstration was cancelled."

The Dresden police, which banned all demonstrations with Pegida's agreement, is known to have ties with extreme right-wing circles. Most recently, it delayed investigating the killing of a refugee following a Pegida demonstration.

The police have failed to explain why the entire demonstration was canceled and why the police forbade all demonstrations—including counter-demonstrations—rather than providing Bachmann with personal protection. Even if one were to take the Twitter post for good coin, the banning of the demonstration as a whole can hardly be justified on the grounds of protecting the demonstrators.

The decision sets a dangerous precedent for banning demonstrations in the future and is a blatant attack on democratic rights.

At the same time, the agreement to cancel the Pegida demonstration is an attempt to turn the aggressors into victims and place the spotlight on them once again. As the FAZ commentary makes clear, the real aim is to downplay Pegida's hostility to foreigners and their campaign against Islam and make it seem presentable.

The Pegida demonstrations have been staged affairs produced by the media and politicians. Quite small in the beginning, they received disproportionate attention in the press. Politicians from the Left Party to the Christian Social Democrats declared that they understood the "justified concerns" of demonstrators and offered to engage in dialogue.

The sizes of the demonstrations were systematically exaggerated by the police and the media. A research group led by the sociologist Dieter Rucht came to the conclusion that at most 17,000 demonstrators took part last Monday, and not the 25,000 reported by the police. The estimated number of demonstrators in Leipzig, the group reported, had been doubled by the police to 4,000. In reality, only 2,000 had participated.

There is widespread popular opposition to Pegida. On Monday, tens of thousands all over Germany participated in counter-demonstrations. In Munich, there were 12,000 demonstrators, with 10,000 in Wiesbaden and just as many in Bielefeld. Thousands also took to the streets in Magdeburg, Braunschweig, Leipzig and many other cities. The various protests organised by local branches of Pegida, on the other hand, attracted just a few hundred people.

Rucht also concluded that the size of the Pegida demonstrations had already reached its high point. "Pegida became gradually smaller and thinned out," said Rucht. It is precisely at this moment that the extreme right wingers are being provided with a new platform to promote themselves.

On Sunday evening, Pegida organiser Kathrin Oertel appeared on a leading TV talk show for the first time. The host of the programme, Günther Jauch, gave her ample opportunity to present her fascist views. She used the interview as an opportunity to proclaim the failure of a light-minded "multicultural" attitude, criticise supposed preachers of hate in Islamic schools and demand a tightening of restrictions on the right to asylum.

The other participants in the discussion were carefully selected. None of them opposed her, even partially. Seated next to her was Alexander Gauland, vice president of the extreme right-wing Alternative for Germany (AfD). Gauland said that Pegida was a natural ally of his party and declared that the suspected terror threat against Pegida represented “the beginning of Islamisation.” In this way, he identified Islam with terrorism without further comment.

Former president of the German parliament Wolfgang Thierse (Social Democratic Party, SPD) and 34-year member of parliament Jens Spahn took turns engaging Oertel and offered to enter into discussions. “One can talk about all of the 19 points that form the basis of your demonstrations, but first it would be necessary to sit down together,” said Spahn.

Frank Richter, who leads the state of Saxony’s Center for Political Education, was also invited. Back when the demonstrations were still quite small, Richter had already said they made “strong arguments” and called the right-wing extremists “concerned citizens, who have concerns about their culture and their city.”

Richter went on to attack the other participants in the interview for not backing Pegida more fully. He said it represented “a low point of political culture,” when politicians did not seek dialogue with “concerned citizens.”

The day after the talk show, Richter opened the doors of the Saxony Culture Ministry to Pegida for a press conference. Bachmann and Oertel were given the opportunity to spread their propaganda in a publicly financed arena. They announced here that they would not continue to demonstrate indefinitely, but said they wanted to enter into discussion with politicians in order to consolidate their movement.

This encouragement of extreme right-wing and anti-Muslim racists is a serious warning. Just as French president Françoise Hollande paid court to the extreme right Front National, the most reactionary elements in Germany are being mobilised to carry out an extremely unpopular policy of attacks on social programmes and war abroad.

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