

## Far right meets “concerned citizens”: politicization of migration in Germany and the case of Chemnitz

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### Part IV: The geographical localization of societal conflict

From a social geography perspective, also the geographical dimension of the „Chemnitz incident“ needs to be integrated in the explanatory frame. Space and place on the one hand play a role as actual locales where specific events take place. On the other hand they are a result of perceptions and imaginations and thus appear as part of the social construction of reality. Perceptions about spaces and places are individually constructed on the basis of personal practices, memories and emotions. Place meaning and place identity are produced and reproduced on an individual but also collective basis, and they are not static but reflect changing materialities, contexts and practices (Harvey 1993; Cresswell 1996). The sense of place is also a crucial part of identity formation. Generally speaking, regional or local identity can be understood as part of the personal identity that results from the subjective self-localisation in a spatial context as a sense of belonging (Weichhart 1990, p. 23). Regional or local identity can develop on an individual basis, but also as collective understanding of representation, which displays a high degree of persistence. The transformation of geographical settings over time or of norms referring to the consumption of public spaces can cause a sense of insecurity and resistance among locals, who perceive that the actual situation does not fit to their imagination of a specific place.

Applying those thoughts to the “Chemnitz incident”, we first need to identify the main places under debate, which are the Karl-Marx-Monument (for public demonstrations), the “Zentralhaltestelle”, a central tram and bus station which serves as a central node in public transport, and the “Stadthallenpark” (as central park and public “showroom” of the city), which is in close vicinity to the “Zentralhaltestelle”. During socialist times, the Karl-Marx-Monument and the adjacent streets (*Brückenstraße* and *Straße der Nationen*) were designed as central routes and places for political demonstrations which were an important element of state representation during the socialist regime (see Part I of this blog). Also the protests against the regime during 1989 can be localized in this area. Until today, the Karl-Marx-Monument serves as a stage for the public expression of opinions.



*Karl-Marx-Monument in Chemnitz: Currently, road construction at the foot of the monument prevents the conduct of demonstrations. Behind the monument, a banner gives testimony of the recent confrontations (“Chemnitz ist weder grau noch braun” / “Chemnitz is neither grey nor brown”). Source: B. Glorius 2018*

After the end of the socialist regime, the city center of Chemnitz underwent physical transformations, especially in the very core of the town. The central bus and tram station was built, which today serves as important transit point but also as entry point to the shopping area of the old town center. Between the central bus and tram station and the Karl-Marx-Monument, the “Stadthallenpark” serves as public green and is – especially during the summer months – a much frequented public space and location of countless open air events.



*Chemnitz, Stadthallenpark, with the Karl-Marx-Monument in the back. Source: B. Glorius 2018*

The arrival of asylum seekers and their gradual integration in the city is clearly visible at those central locations. During the week, especially the teenage asylum seekers meet at the central bus station and hang out in front of the shops which offer free WLAN. In and around the park, groups of men with migration background meet for a chat, while during the weekend, families with migration background are strongly present in the park and use the public green for meeting, picnic and as playground for the children. As Chemnitz has a very low proportion of foreign population, the effects of the increased immigration of asylum seekers are most visible in those central public places. Thus, questions of legitimacy of asylum migration and the German asylum politics materialize in those spaces and trigger critical reactions by the sheer presence of persons with a visible migration background. Like one participant in the roundtable discussions of the local newspaper "Freie Presse" puts it: *"The bad thing is that the asylum seekers are constantly lured to the city center - for example, with free Wi-Fi. That's why they hang around there; it's clear that a woman feels insecure there."* (Chemnitz resident, male, 46 years) Another male citizen, who was interviewed by a TV station, claimed that he used to hang out in the "Stadthallenpark" and have a beer on one of the benches, but since "the foreigners took over", he feels less attracted to the place. When the journalist asked about negative experiences, the interviewee reported of male migrants abusing the benches by sitting on the rest and placing the feet on the seat.

Since many years, the "Stadthallenpark" is presented as a dangerous place in the public media, with a high occurrence of drug delicts and deviant behavior related to alcohol abuse. The local press is frequently reporting on security issues related to the park and the central bus station. Local shop-owners started employing more security personnel, and the police is frequently present and carries out controls of individuals in the area. During the round-table meeting organized by the local press, a police officer explains that a high proportion of delicts are committed by a small number of delinquents, without referring to their ethnic background, but emphasizing the minority situation of delinquency among the visitors of the "Stadthallenpark".

In the public debate, arguments regarding the security in the town center mingle individual experiences, emotions and perceptions. While some (female) citizens are expressing their general discomfort with groups lingering in public places without referring to their ethnicity, or criticize sexualized behavior with reference to cultural otherness of delinquents, there are also quotes which generally blame foreigners for bringing criminality and insecurity in the city:

*"I am afraid of gatherings of certain groups. They might not even notice me, but I still have that feeling."* (Chemnitz resident, female, retirée)

*"It's not acceptable that men who stem from the Islamic culture think that I am an offer just because I wear a short skirt. They whistle and call "Sexy Hexy", and I think this is bad."* (Chemnitz resident, female, 53 years)

*"The security situation in the city center has changed rapidly. Three years ago, no weekly police missions were necessary in the Stadthallenpark, no video surveillance and no concrete blocks on the Christmas market. My partner was harassed in the evenings in the city center by foreigners - that was my key experience."* (Chemnitz resident, male, 46 years)

Frequently, individual experiences with discomfort or sexual harassment of women in public spaces in Chemnitz are embedded in the wider context of asylum migration to Germany and its consequences. In the last quote, for example, the concrete blocks on the Chemnitz Christmas market, which are mentioned to underline the deterioration of the security situation, were introduced to many Christmas markets in Germany after a Tunisian asylum seeker committed a terrorist attack

with a van on the Berlin Christmas market in 2016, killing 12 people and injuring 55. Thus, the subjective perception of the security situation in Chemnitz is argumentatively linked to the asylum migration since 2015.

During the round table debate of the local newspaper, some participants also reflect on the subjectivity of their perceptions and claim that those are shaped by a disproportional representation of criminal incidents in the local press and the large activities of Neo-Nazi activists who exploit those incidents for their purposes.

*“But fear also develops in our imaginations. Therefore we need to criticize the media which only report on negative incidents. They could also report on positive events. But fear sells better.”*  
(Chemnitz resident, male, 43 years)

*“I don’t feel unsafe in Chemnitz. Therefore I ask myself: Why is the perceived security so much worse than the actual one? I do not know anyone who was attacked. Nevertheless, everyone of my acquaintances speaks of a queasy feeling. In Germany, especially in Saxony, there is a strong right-wing movement, which blows up every incident - it creates the feeling that there is no more security.”*  
(Male, 66 years, lives in the vicinity of Chemnitz)

### **Conclusion and outlook:**

Reflecting on the „Chemnitz incident“, it becomes clear that there is no easy answer to the question why those developments occurred, not even a common frame for the interpretation of what exactly happened. The violent death of a local citizen who was perceived as member of the “own” group and the fact that asylum seekers (“the other”) were suspected to having committed the crime, together with a specific communicative framing of immigration and contextual factors derived from recent history, and the specific political culture of the Chemnitz region all have to be considered for explaining the incident. However, even though this development seems to be unique in its process and outcome, we can draw some generalisations: First, the model of politicisation, consisting of increased salience, diversity of opinion and the appearance of new actors, is well applicable to this case, and we can see furthermore the cross-connections between the three aspects. Second, we could show the effects of shifting the communicative frame on migration. The populist tone which was introduced by PEGIDA and AfD, but quickly adopted by more moderate political actors, facilitated the normalization of extremist statements and prepared the ground for action. An increase of violent attacks against foreigners and foreign restaurants in Chemnitz since the “Chemnitz incident” is the direct and telling result. Third, and this is definitely not a singular development, we can see the effectiveness of right-wing extremist networks, who are very well organized, are able to mobilize a large number of members within a short time, and manage to integrate “ordinary citizens” in their forms of protest, profiting from the expansion of populist and extremist discourse.

Today, in Chemnitz, debates on the interpretation of the „Chemnitz incident“ are still ongoing. The mayor of Chemnitz is assaulted by citizens for not taking their side and defending them against public voices who label the Chemnitz citizens as extremists. Since the “Chemnitz incident”, two further foreign restaurants have been attacked and the restaurant-owners injured, and a new Neo-Nazi-group was arrested in Chemnitz and accused of preparing terrorist attacks. While many German citizens complain about perceived insecurity, foreign inhabitants report increasing violations of their personal integrity in public space by verbal and physical assaults.

*My wife and my three children are not going out alone any more. I always accompany them, because we are always insulted, for example as a social parasite, even in our allotment. Once I was almost beaten up. It is really stressful to be a foreigner in Chemnitz. That was already before the city festival (and the fatal incident of August 26. B.G.). After that it has increased. I really respect old age, but most of the time, retirees insult us. (Chemnitz resident with migration background, male, 45 years)*

However, to finish this article with at least some positive outlooks, we would like to mention two aspects which could improve the situation over time: First, since the incident, all political actors on local and federal level take effort to organize public meetings in order to improve communication between citizens and political elites. Second, civil society organisations have even increased their activities to raise awareness for democratic principles and activate citizens to express their thoughts in this regard. For example, a local activist initiated a music event as a reaction to the Chemnitz incident in order to demonstrate the strength of democratic groups in Chemnitz which oppose racism. The concert, which took place one week after the fatal incident and the neo-nazi-demonstrations, gathered over 65,000 visitors, which gave a strong illustration of the concert's motto "*Wir sind mehr / We are more*". Since then, cultural activities increased which aim to raise the public awareness of the merits of democracy. For example, several activist groups from the cultural sphere performed in the "European Balcony Project" on Saturday, 10 November, and proclaimed a democratic "Chemnitz Manifesto" in front of the Karl-Marx-Monument.

Third, as some foreign citizens of Chemnitz reflect, the mobilization of right-wing representatives seemingly also mobilized parts of formerly passive citizens. While before "Chemnitz", foreigners were frequently left alone when being insulted in public space, now, also the tolerant or xenophilic citizens are showing their face. Maybe also this group can be labeled as new actors within the politicization framework and represent an important counterweight to extremist attitudes and policies.

#### **Literature:**

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