

1: Far Right Meets «Concerned Citizens»: Politicization of Migration in Germany & the Case of Chemnitz

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Introduction

At least since the sudden shift of the refugee routes in 2015 and the concomitant massive arrival of asylum seekers in Germany, migration is by far the most debated issue in Germany. The politicization of migration reached out into all parts of society, leading to societal ruptures, increase of hate speech and aggressive discourses, and the appearance or growth of new political actors, notably on the far right-wing side. Right-wing parties and neo-nazi activists successfully connected the topic of migration and asylum with questions of legitimacy, cultural otherness, belonging and identity, and thus reached a large part of the German society who put the legal and practical support of asylum migration into question and stress the negative consequences of mass-immigration for German society.

The societal ruptures could be clearly observed during the so-called “Chemnitz incident”, referring to a violent and fatal battle among Germans and asylum seekers in the city of Chemnitz on the night of August 26th, which was followed by a series of demonstrations where the extreme right-wing united with ordinary “concerned” citizens in their protest against immigration.

In this blog we will explore how right-wing populist groups used the “Chemnitz incident” to politicize migration and why they were successful in such politicization. In doing so, we incorporate explanatory approaches from communication studies and other social sciences and we will place the events in Chemnitz into the larger context of politicization of migration in Europe. We thus directly refer to the research of CEASEVAL on Patterns of politicization on refugees and policy responses, which will produce a series of upcoming country reports on the politicization in Finland, Germany, Bulgaria, Hungary, Spain, Italy, Greece and Turkey.

Part 1: THE CHEMNITZ-INCIDENT

Chemnitz? Never heard of this place?

Chemnitz, a city of rd. 250,000 inhabitants, is located in the south of Saxony, close to the Czech border. The city and the region used to be the industrial core of Saxony. As one of the forerunners of early industrialization, Chemnitz became a hot-spot of textile production and gained the nickname of “Saxon Manchester”. During socialist times, Chemnitz was one of the



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most important centers of industrial production of the GDR and was renamed “Karl-Marx-Stadt” to honor the industrious spirit of its inhabitants (Photo 1). After the revolution of 1989 and the German reunification of 1990, Chemnitz suffered an economic breakdown, followed by massive unemployment and huge population losses (near 25% between 1990 and 2009), due to internal migration and decreasing birth rates. As a result, the age structure developed towards a strongly ageing population, with a share of 65 and older population of 27.1% (2010). Since the 2000s, the economic and population situation is stabilizing again. Unemployment decreased down to 7%, and even the population development stabilized, mainly due to net immigration of international migrants, notably international students of the Technical University of Chemnitz (numbers increased from 617 in 2008 to 3,001 in 2017), and – especially since 2015 – asylum seekers. In March 2018 6,000 persons (rounded) with “asylum background” (asylum seekers or persons with refugee or subsidiary protection status) lived in the city.

Photo 1: Chemnitz' Karl-Marx-Monument during a State demonstration, 25.05.1980



Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-W0526-112
Foto: Thieme, Wolfgang | 25. Mai 1980

The Karl-Marx-Monument, erected in 1971 to commemorate the denomination of Chemnitz into “Karl-Marx-Stadt”. Until today, it serves as a focal point in the public life of Chemnitz and frequently serves as start and end point of demonstrations. The incident of August 26 took place in close vicinity to the monument, as did the demonstrations thereafter (Photo: W. Thieme).

What happened:

In the night of 26th August 2018, a verbal conflict developed among several persons in a public place in the city center of Chemnitz. The conflict escalated, leaving three men injured, of which one person, a 35-year old German with Cuban roots, died in hospital. Two young men, asylum seekers from Iraq and Syria, were arrested by the police as suspects of the crime.

What followed:

Already during the day after the crime, the federal branch of the right-wing party „Alternative für Deutschland / *Alternative for Germany*“ published a facebook-post, mobilizing people to join a spontaneous demonstration “against violence” in Chemnitz. Also the extreme right hooligan group “Kaotic Chemnitz” mobilized via social media to join a demonstration. In the late afternoon, 800 persons gathered at the place of the incident in Chemnitz’ city center, close to the Karl-Marx-Monument. Later, groups of hooligans pulled through the streets of Chemnitz, looking for foreigners and attacking them.

One day later, approximately 6,000 persons joined a demonstration of the right-wing-populist local initiative “Pro Chemnitz” at the Karl-Marx-Monument. Among them were ordinary citizens, but also violent Neo-Nazis and hooligans. 1,500 persons joined a counter-demonstration. The demonstration – escorted by approximately 600 policemen – quickly escalated, leaving 20 persons injured. The police report shows that several groups of violent hooligans chased foreigners and left-wing protesters. During the demonstrations, several persons signaled the Hitler salute. In the evening, a group of hooligans set upon the Jewish restaurant “Schalom”, shouting anti-Semitic slogans and attacking the restaurant owner.

On the weekend of September 1st, again demonstrations rallied through Chemnitz. The Anti-European and Anti-Islam-Movement PEGIDA (“Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes” / “*Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Western World*”), and the right-wing party “Alternative für Deutschland / *Alternative for Germany*” organized a “march of mourning”. In the public invitation, they explained the motivation as “*the brutal killing of a Chemnitz inhabitant and father by two asylum seekers. We want to commemorate all victims who died due to the asylum politics of the German State administration.*” Quite ironic is the fact that the victim did not fit into the ideal picture of right wing ideology, as he himself had a migration background and furthermore was known for not sympathizing with right-wing positions and parties. Notwithstanding this fact, he was instrumental for the right-wing demonstration, by switching the code from his ethnic background to the social position (father) and citizenry (Chemnitz inhabitant).

The incidents caused a strong public echo, not only in Germany, but worldwide. Concerns were raised that Nazi ideology would gain ground again in Germany, destabilizing the post-war democratic development. Also, safety and security issues were raised from two sides: while one side claimed the number of crime incidents committed by asylum seekers and refugees and the threat of Islamic terrorism, the other side expressed their concern that right-wing terrorism could be on the rise.



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In the aftermath of the “Chemnitz incident”, a number of internal scandals occurred and dominated the German news for weeks: the arrest warrant for one of the Chemnitz suspects was published on the internet by a prison officer, who was immediately suspended from his duties; the president of the German office for the protection of the constitution, Hans-Georg Maaßen, publicly considered a video as fake which documented Germans chasing foreigners in Chemnitz, and argued that the publication of this video should “distract the public from the case of murder in Chemnitz” (Photo 2). (He later was suspended from the presidency, but stayed in a high-rank position of the Ministry of Interior.) After three weeks of detention, one of the Chemnitz’ suspects was released as there were no concrete proofs for his participation in the attack. His lawyer claimed that the long detention only occurred because of the public prejudice against his client.

Foto 2: Graffito reacting to the banalization of a video showing the chasing of foreigners in Chemnitz



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veral videos documented the chase of two afghan men during a demonstration of right-wing protestors. One of the videos was widely shared in the internet under the name “Hase-Video” (<https://twitter.com/azeckenbiss/status/1033790392037199873?lang=de>). During the first sequence of the video, a female voice from the off says “Hase, Du bleibst hier! / Honey-bunny, you stay here!”, obviously holding back her partner from participating in the chase. This (between caring and patronizing) personal address turns the chase – and thus the sum of xenophobic activities on this day, into a banal leisure activity. (Photo: Birgit Glorius)

Meanwhile in Saxony and Chemnitz, not only was the “incident” politicized but also its public representation via the media. Many citizens protested against the prejudice that all inhabitants were Nazis and claimed their right to join anti-asylum demonstrations. In a series of public talks



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initiated by the Saxon Federal government, the mayor of Chemnitz, and the local newspaper “*Freie Presse*”, citizens complained about the sense of insecurity caused by the visual presence of foreigners in town. Notably the “*Stadthallenpark*”, a public park in the very town center, and the streets around the central tram and bus station in the center raised concern. Drug dealers have long frequented the “*Stadthallenpark*”, and it is also a site of alcohol abuse. Many asylum seekers use the area as meeting place and hang out during the day, closely watched and frequently controlled by police officers that drive by. In public debates about the effect of refugee migration to Chemnitz, citizens frequently claim that the presence of large numbers of young, foreign men, especially in central public places like the “*Stadthallenpark*”, was overwhelming and frightening for them.

How can we explain this incident and how it was politicized? Learn more about it in our second part of this blog.



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