

## Germany is in great need of a meaningful discussion about Islamophobia

*While Germany has witnessed public displays of support for refugees during the refugee crisis, this year has also seen the rise of anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim demonstrations organised by the 'PEGIDA' group. [Astrid Bötticher](#) writes on these conflicting attitudes within Germany and the problem of Islamophobia exemplified by PEGIDA. She argues that Islamophobia must become a scientific rather than a political concept and that it needs to be openly discussed in Germany before it can be successfully tackled.*



In December 2014, a small network of 12 people with resentments against Muslims, immigrants and mainstream politicians founded [Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West](#) (known by its German abbreviation PEGIDA). Starting as a Facebook Page in October 2014, the group created a mass movement within a short period of time, attracting tens of thousands of marchers in Dresden and other cities such as Leipzig (organised by a franchise 'Legida').

The movement was originally founded to protest against the violence of Islamic extremists, who took part in several riots, injuring policemen and their critics. PEGIDA organised protest rallies every Monday, making reference to the famous Monday-rallies of the late 80s, which opposed the Soviet-based regime in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). By doing so, PEGIDA tried to forge for themselves an image as "true democrats".

Starting with a couple of hundred protesters, the movement was soon able to attract thousands, reaching a peak of 25,000 marchers [in January 2015](#), after the Charlie Hebdo terror attack in Paris. But Islamophobia is not new to Germany, as the terrorist group [National Socialist Underground](#) (NSU) and its attacks go to show. The NSU carried out regular attacks against Muslims, and those civilians the group thought of as Muslims, in the years between 2000 and 2006.

The concept of Islamophobia is still not fully recognised in Germany today, though PEGIDA was defined as a 'populist success' in academic spheres. The political elite acknowledged the movement at the time when PEGIDA regularly attracted more than 10,000 marchers; the protesters were recognised as 'Wutbürger' (enraged citizens) and the ideology of Islamophobia began to be discussed.

The main discourse from politicians emphasised that the marchers were 'normal people' and not 'Nazis' (the movement's leadership argued that the mainstream media would accuse protesters of being Nazis, though they 'only' wanted to protest against Muslim immigrants, against politicians and in favour of new immigration policies). The political elite claimed that the main elements of the extremist movement were simply misunderstood.



Anti-PEGIDA concerts and marches were also organised, and former PEGIDA protesters were invited to join the anti-

PEGIDA gatherings. The ritual of going to demonstrations on Monday was eventually broken by the presence of alternatives for the crowd. However, the media reported several arson attacks against the accommodations of asylum seekers around that time, and it is still unclear if the attackers were participants in the marches.

### **How can we classify PEGIDA?**

So far, PEGIDA fits into the general picture of a **slowly evolving** Islamophobic movement, militating against a generic 'Islamic threat' that the country has been facing for several years. Borrowing from Marx's claim that 'a ghost is haunting Europe', we can say that 'a Poltergeist' is haunting it today – a picture of a bloodthirsty Muslim who wants to kill as many people as possible, or, in the best case scenario, outnumber Europeans by making as many babies as possible. And of course, his wife wears a headscarf.

German talk show hosts have invited extremist Islamists for live TV round tables, contributing to making them socially acceptable. This provided them with a form of legitimacy they do not deserve. They helped to create a picture of an Islam that provides rigid rules, violence and runs counter to modernity. At the same time, jihadist Islamism is now perceived as a 'fashionable' youth movement by some Salafist Muslims in Western diasporas, attracting even some non-Muslim youngsters.

The concept of Islamophobia is still not fully developed and it is often seen as a neologism. Yet German society is in great need of a meaningful discussion about *Muslimangst* (German for 'Fear of Muslims'), Islamophobia, and xenophobic resentment against Muslims – whichever term we use to describe it.

We need to reach a point of understanding that starts from the core arguments of militant democracy and the values of human rights. These are first, that there should be no freedom for the enemies of freedom; second, that human rights violations are a possible threat to humanity as a whole; and third, that victims of human rights violations should get our full attention and not be merely played off against each other. The concept of militant democracy allows us to defend liberal democracy and its central values, such as free speech, religious freedom and the right to follow your definition of happiness: human rights that are widely agreed upon at the international level.

The discussion of this concept is frequently criticised by citing the existence of Muslim anti-Semitism. More broadly, Islamic extremism is often presented as a threat to human rights in its own right. However, while those who aim to promote the concept of Islamophobia as a form of racism and xenophobia are also likely to accept the existence of anti-Semitism as a problem, the other side of this debate is frequently prone to ignoring hatred of Muslims.

All of these arguments play victims off against one another. While the label "Islamophobia" directly refers to a form of fear, we need to ask ourselves if resentment and prejudice can be accurately pictured best by this term. If Islamophobia is understood as form of racism, then we could define it as an ideology and a practice that is based on the construction of people with attributed collective characteristics. These attributions are interpreted as negative and interpreted as impossible or difficult to change.

Islamophobia then becomes a form of a generalised (actual and fictitious) picture of Muslims for the benefit of the accuser and to the detriment of the victim. Islamophobia justifies aggression against Muslims. Stating this, however, means to define Islamophobia as an extremist ideology. Its proponents are extremists, they are not radicals. Radicalism can be situated at the edges of the democratic consensus while extremism lies outside the boundary. Though their meanings overlap to a certain extent, they should not be equated.

Confronted with radicalism, the democratic system has shown an ability to absorb radical demands by way of arriving at reasonable agreements through compromise. Confronted with extremism, the democratic system has to rely on law enforcement and other sanctions that are in accordance with human rights standards, as extremist demands (based, among other things, on inequality and discrimination) cannot be accommodated in pluralistic societies.

### **What should be done?**

The positive way to break the movement's ritualistic Monday marches by offering alternatives was intelligent and is an important instrument for directing mass networks. Rituals are most effectively tackled by alternative rituals. But first of all, Islamophobia needs to become a scientific rather than a political concept. Therefore, an in-depth discussion about the phenomenon and its implications needs to take place.

A European security concept that takes Islamophobia into account has to be established. Interest groups that try to play victims of extremism off against one another need to be excluded. What is the best base for measuring extremist ideology and its proponents? This is a necessary step for the future of research.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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