

Anti-Islamic Pegida groups have spread beyond their German heartlands

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Anti-Islamic Pegida groups received significant attention earlier this year with their demonstrations attracting thousands of participants in Dresden and other German cities. [Lars Erik Berntzen](#) and [Manès Weisskircher](#) write on the way that Pegida has spread into other western European countries. They note that while Pegida groups in other countries have drawn far fewer participants than their German equivalent, commentators should be careful not to write off their protests as insignificant. They argue that the Pegida demonstrations and online activity of recent months are indicative of the growing potential of far-right political players in contemporary western European politics.



Anti-Islamic ‘Pegida’ (“Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident”) groups are closely associated with Germany, but they have spread far beyond their origins. Over the last few months groups have cropped up under the same label across Western Europe. Tallying about 200 online communities ranging from local to transnational ones, they have marched through the streets in countries such as England, Norway, Denmark, Belgium and Austria. After months of intensive mobilisation, street activism by Pegida groups now seems to be on the decline. Still, their activism strongly indicates that anti-Islamic forces in western Europe are growing in potency.



None of the Pegida groups outside of Germany were close to reaching the record high numbers of Pegida in Dresden, their originator and source of inspiration. In Dresden their “walks” reached peaks of some 20,000, whereas elsewhere they have seldom gathered more than a couple of hundred people. Meanwhile, despite attempts, their efforts have fizzled in countries such as Switzerland and Sweden. Even in countries where they have been comparatively active, such as Austria, Norway and Denmark, they have never managed to draw more than a few hundred participants. In many cases they have also met organised resistance of a much larger magnitude, with counter-demonstrations often drawing crowds in the thousands. This opposition to Pegida has come from mainstream political and religious organisations, as well as from activists from the autonomous left and anti-racist groups.

The small amount of supporters in comparison to the Eastern German strongholds and the large showing of people opposed to Pegida have caused politicians, social scientists and journalists alike to believe that the movement has failed outside of Germany. However this view is overly simplistic and potentially misleading. While it is true that they were only able to attract broad segments of society in Germany; the continuous mobilisation of several hundred far-right supporters reflects the growth of anti-Islamic and far-right mobilisation in western Europe. As insights from the research on social movements show, the regular mobilisation of a considerable amount of supporters is not a sign of political weakness.

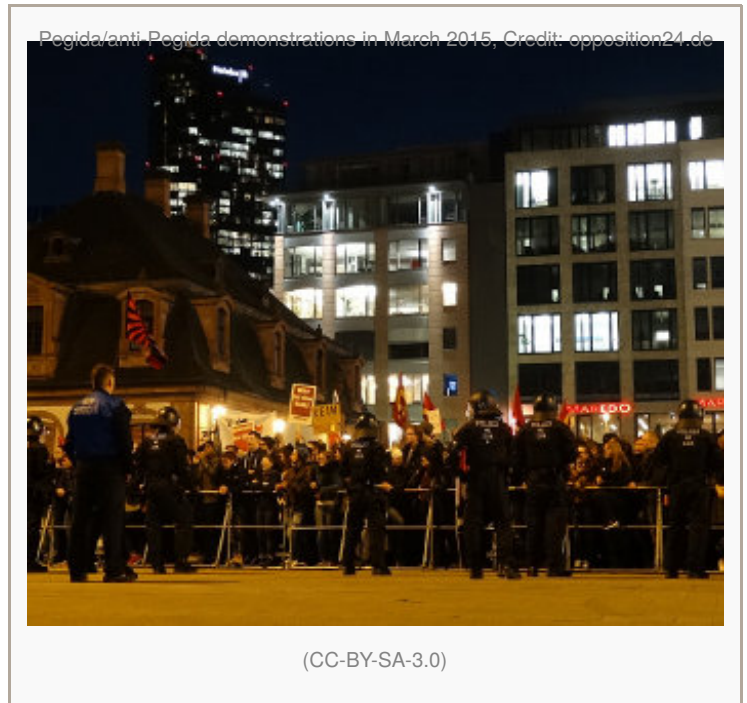
Pegida’s spread across western Europe

Social scientists have emphasised that mobilising people to go to the streets is not an easy task. As the economist Mancur Olson has argued: why should a “rational” individual engage in collective action? Are the costs not too high, especially when ones’ own participation only contributes slightly to the success of the collective? Moreover, why should a rational person attend a protest event if she benefits just as much from success even if she is absent?

Olson’s theoretical argument has empirical limits. Political protest has become a familiar phenomenon and demonstrations are not an uncommon sight. Nevertheless, activism is not ubiquitous. Scholars analysing data on

protest events show that only a small share of a country's inhabitants take to the barricades – even during the most intensive periods of the biggest movements, from struggles for full citizenship rights to anti-war efforts. Protest events are always limited in time and space.

Considering the difficulties of collective action, the regular mobilisation of a few hundred people cannot be regarded as a failure. Even though the list of problems that people may consider as grievances is long, only a few other players apart from Pegida were able to mobilise similar numbers in Norway, Austria or Denmark. Remarkably, the far right is represented in the parliaments of all these countries. As social movement scholars have shown, political representation usually keeps far-right protesters away from the streets, with discontent shifting to the parliamentary arena instead.



In comparison to their street activities, Pegida has drawn much larger followings online. Many groups have thousands of supporters. Clearly, some of these numbers must be taken with a grain of salt: for example, the remarkable strength of the Icelandic Pegida group [results](#) from its many non-Icelandic supporters. Still, anti-Islamic activity is extensive in online forums and groups. The huge gap in mobilisation is partly explained by the high social cost and stigma stemming from marching under the banner of a group that is seen by many as extreme right.

Gaps in online support and “offline” mobilisation are in any case not unusual for protest groups. But why should only protests on the streets count as relevant activism? Social movements can rely on many different forms of action and one motive behind them is to raise awareness for perceived concerns, in this instance the alleged “Islamisation” of Europe. Many of the around 200 Pegida online groups disseminate writings and ideas on a daily basis, with audiences in the tens of thousands. Their followers are affected in their views by the online activities of Pegida groups.

Pegida is not the only recent case of far-right mobilisation in western Europe. In the past couple of years several other far right groups have taken to the streets. Prominent examples are the “Identitarians”, originating in France, and the English Defence League and their spawn of subsidiary groups in many western European countries. These pre-existing communities were closely connected to the Pegida-protests in their respective countries. The supposed failure of Pegida outside of Germany was taken as a hopeful sign by the many people who viewed their “sudden” emergence with alarm. It should not be, for their activity amounts to a broadening of the anti-Islamic activist base.

Pegida is neither an exclusively German phenomenon nor a failure. It must be understood as the latest iteration of an anti-Islamic mobilisation that has gained ground over the last decade. Even though the label Pegida might fade away after a brief spell of popularity, its rapid spread points to the potential of anti-Islamic forces in western Europe. Not to be explained away, their protest merits more attention. Political observers should recognise the magnitude of the phenomenon and its implications for future far-right activism.

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