

# Pegida is only the latest in a long line of German far-right movements to mobilise against Islam

 [blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/01/20/pegida-is-only-the-latest-in-a-long-line-of-german-far-right-movements-to-mobilise-against-i](https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2015/01/20/pegida-is-only-the-latest-in-a-long-line-of-german-far-right-movements-to-mobilise-against-i)

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*A large number of rallies have been held in Germany over recent months by the 'Pegida' movement (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West). [Nitzan Shoshan](#) notes that while Pegida have made headlines across the world, they are by no means the first far-right movement in Germany to protest against immigration and Islam. He writes that the experiences of previous far-right groups provide some insights on the potential harm that such movements can cause in local communities.*



While commentators have warned of a potential hike in Islamophobic currents across Europe following the terror attacks in Paris earlier this month, and while critics have condemned as dangerous and cynically manipulative the rhetorical uses to which far right leaders such as the UK Independence Party's [Nigel Farage](#) or [Marine Le Pen](#) of France's Front National have put the assassinations, observers of European politics will rightly note that, throughout the continent, anti-Islamic and anti-immigration xenophobia hardly stood in need of a helping hand. Quite the contrary, both Farage and Le Pen have scored significant electoral gains in recent years, and immigration, particularly – if far from exclusively – of Muslims, has for quite some time established itself as the central and unifying theme of a European far right that seems to agree on little else besides.

## European patriots

Perhaps nowhere in Europe has Islamophobia occupied as predominant a place in public debates over the past year as in Germany, where the steady ascent of the Dresden-based movement [Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West](#) (or Pegida, following its acronym in German) has forced even the firmly conservative Angela Merkel to repeat, in her recent New Year's speech, former president Christian Wulff's controversial statement that [Islam is part of Germany](#).

Founded by the self-described "foreigner friendly" Lutz Bachmann, who has withdrawn from the public limelight (though not from key organisational activities) following the exposure of his [past criminal convictions](#) for burglary and drug related offences, Pegida has consistently shunned the media, befuddled the experts, and frustrated political leaders. [Some](#) understand the movement as a pressure-valve for airing a range of resentments, while others see in it the contemporary prevalence of "culture wars" discourses. North Rhine-Westphalia Social Democrat Minister of Internal Affairs Ralf Jäger drew fire for [describing Pegida followers as neo-Nazis](#), while Federal Finance Minister Christian Democrat Wolfgang Schäuble attributed the movement's success to the [demographic rise of financially-secure retirees](#) who have nothing better to worry about in their free time.

The Pegida movement has generated a number of counter-protests; Image credit: Bündnis 90/Die Grünen Nordrhein-Westfalen (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Aside from the evident diversity of its sympathisers – many, though by no means all, of whom apparently have no previous involvement with far right (or any) political activism – some of the confusion probably owes to Pegida's manifesto. Among its [19 points](#), the document affirms the right of asylum, calls for better integration of and improved counseling for refugees, supports sexual diversity, and condemns hate speech; all starkly untypical positions for the German far right.

But most observers rightly pay little or no heed to the document, which contrasts sharply with the blatantly anti-refugee and anti-immigration language of both speakers and attendants at weekly demonstrations in Dresden and

elsewhere, whose turnouts have shot up from a few hundreds in October to [approximately 25,000](#) (40,000 according to the organisers) most recently; not to mention the [explicitly xenophobic nationalism](#) that Pegida leaders have allegedly expressed in internal online forums. A burgeoning anti-Pegida movement has taken to the streets in a number of German cities, most forcefully on [12 January](#), to protest against racism and Islamophobia.

### A crowded field

And yet, its current dominance in media coverage notwithstanding, the three-month young Pegida entered an already rather crowded political arena of Islamophobic racism and xenophobic nationalism. The last year has witnessed a marked [rise in demonstrations](#) against asylum seeker shelters in numerous German cities, while violent attacks against existing shelters have similarly [skyrocketed](#). Earlier this month in Dresden, under the shadow of regular Pegida marches, local resident groups [successfully pressured a hotel owner](#) to scrap the imminent conversion of his property into residence for asylum seekers.



For [some two years now](#), marches protesting against the construction of residences for asylum seekers have regularly taken to the streets of Berlin's district of Marzahn-Hellersdorf. Against the hopes of their local political opponents, far from petering out, the demonstrations – led by the right-wing extremist National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) – have instead progressively augmented [both their frequency and their attendance](#). The crowds at such events appear to comprise a relatively high proportion of visually identifiable soccer hooligans, neo-Nazis, and NPD supporters, though many, too, describe themselves as concerned local neighbours and display no visible signs of political belonging. The rhetoric, with its thinly veiled racism and its indignant condemnation of asylum fraud and immigrant criminality, is scarcely distinguishable from what one hears at Pegida demonstrations.

The considerably less civil Hooligans against Salafists (HoGeSa), with multiple links to a number of local anti-refugee movements as well as to militant neo-Nazi groupings, abruptly broke into the headlines last October following a spectacularly violent demonstration that paralysed Cologne's central train station area, where an estimated 5,000-strong mob overwhelmed a far outnumbered police force, injuring dozens of officers.

Incomparably more urbane and difficult to locate on the political map is the current *Wunderkind* of German electoral politics, the Eurosceptic, culturally conservative, and economically liberal party Alternative for Germany (AfD). Emboldened by a series of surprising successes at the polls, most notably in last year's European Parliament elections, the AfD has focused on reclaiming economic and fiscal sovereignty and has emphatically rejected accusations of anti-immigrant xenophobia. Nevertheless, its chair Bernd Lucke has [recently expressed sympathy for Pegida](#) and, even as his second-in-command Hans-Olaf Henkel exhorted against the possibly racist nature of the anti-Islamic movement, AfD supporters and activists have [evidently attended its demonstrations](#). Arguably more compromising for the party's attempt to maintain a respectable image is the fact that AfD's state-level electoral gains appear to [correlate with electoral losses for the NPD](#).

### Looking nice

While the Hooligans of HoGeSa, the neo-Nazis of the NPD, and other militant nationalists continue to thrive in certain German settings, emergent xenophobic movements on the far right today struggle for what Germans call *Salonfähigkeit* and can roughly be translated as social acceptability or presentability. Entrepreneurs in Dresden sweat over the [potential harm that movements like Pegida could spell](#) for the city's high-tech firms, for its tourism industry, and for its institutions of higher education; much as the leaders of such movements work hard to produce

and protect their reputation as moderate and upright.

But perhaps the distinction between what is and what is not *Salonfähig* is a false one. The two appear rather to feed on each other, enable each other, and shape each other reciprocally. The fatal saga of the National Socialist Underground (NSU), whose intricate details have unfolded over the past few years in courts and special parliamentary committees at the Federal and state levels, illustrates this comfortable symbiosis with horrifying lucidity.

The NSU terrorist trio, which committed a series of execution-style racist assassinations and numerous armed bank robberies, no doubt belonged with the most militant and violent fringes of German nationalism. As the hearings startlingly revealed, however, its capacity to carry on with its cold-blooded killings for over a decade owed a great deal to normalised racism in the state's law enforcement and intelligence institutions. With a wealth of information at their disposal, police and intelligence agencies repeatedly brushed off numerous clues that suggested the perpetrators were neo-Nazis. Instead, and despite the absence of any supporting evidence, they continued to search for the murderers among immigrant communities, effectively criminalising the families and acquaintances of the victims.

In a similar vein, perhaps the adamant insistence of Pegida's leaders on the movement's nonviolent ways is beside the point. It is too early to determine whether participants in the latest march of 12 January in Dresden had anything to do with the deadly stabbing of an Eritrean asylum seeker, sometime between that evening and the following morning. But, whether or not they and others succeed in branding themselves as reasonable patriots, history suggests that their Islamophobic discourse will not fail to produce more dead bodies in Germany and elsewhere.

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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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