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Behind the rise of Germany's anti-Islamic street movement

January 7, 2015 11.04am GMT



Anti-Islamic protesters on the march in Berlin. Bernd Von Jutrczenka/EPA

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A rally in Dresden has attracted some 18,000 people, all marching under the banner of Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the Occident. The sudden appeal of this group, known as PEGIDA, has caused alarm in the country where Nazism remains in the public consciousness.

The group says it wants to halt what it sees as the dangerous rise in the influence of Islam in European countries and protect “Judeo-Christian culture”. It denies being racist or xenophobic, but leaders from almost every main political party, as well as churches and civil society groups, have condemned the movement. German chancellor, Angela Merkel, has urged Germans not to join PEGIDA’s swelling ranks, describing the group as “full of prejudice, a chilliness, even hatred”.

Many German’s are sympathetic to the cause though. A December poll saw one in three respondents agreeing that PEGIDA marches were justified because of the influence of Islam in Germany.

What do they want?

Beyond broad statements, pinpointing exactly what PEGIDA stands for has proved to be difficult, not least because it has grown so rapidly. An otherwise wide range of factions and concerns have effectively been merged into one group, blurring messages along the way.

It is certainly true that some of the elements of PEGIDA have a distinctly unsavoury agenda, even if the broader organisation rejects accusations of racism. Extreme right-wing gangs and the neo-Nazi NPD party are to be found among its members and primary instigator, Lutz Bachmann, is a convicted petty criminal having served time in prison for burglary and drug offences.

But given the size of PEGIDA's most recent demonstrations, characterising it as marginal or simply neo-Nazi is clearly not wholly accurate.



PEGIDA says it wants to protect Germany's Judeo-Christian culture. Kay Nietfeld/EPA

Germany has struggled to come to terms with the political consequences of large-scale migration over several decades. Until 1998, it was “not a country of immigration”, according to government policy. It was only after 2005 that Angela Merkel's party, the conservative CDU, began to slowly embrace the reality of migration in Germany's towns and cities.

This process of adjustment has undoubtedly had to be accelerated now that it is accepted that Germany will need more migrants over the coming decades to mitigate the affects of an ageing population and to plug skills gaps.

Any feelings of unease around the level of migration have undoubtedly been exacerbated by the high number of asylum seekers that Germany has been receiving lately. More than 150,000 applications were made in the 11 months to November 2014, in large part due to the turmoil of the Arab Spring. This has perhaps persuaded Germans who were previously quietly concerned to express their discontent more vocally and more visibly.

A national problem?

But Germany's migrants are not evenly spread around the country. Most major cities in the western part of the country, such as Frankfurt, Cologne and Munich, have large migrant populations. In some cases, around 20% of residents do not hold German citizenship. Once Germans with at least one foreign or immigrant parent are factored in, that share rises to between 40% and 50%.

In the states which made up East Germany, however, the situation is quite different. Outside Berlin, cities such as Dresden and Leipzig have only very low levels of migrants. As in other European countries, concern about migration is often most acute in those locations least affected by it.

And although smaller rallies have taken place elsewhere, PEGIDA is predominantly based in Dresden and in Saxony. This state is particularly conservative and is the most economically successful of the eastern states. The right-of-centre CDU has been in power there since 1990, and has traditionally taken a negative view of immigration.

Between 2004 and 2014, the extremist NPD was also represented in Saxony state legislature. The far-right terrorist group National Socialist Underground (NSU), accused of conducting a campaign of murders over a decade that shook the nation, was also based there. The NSU's only surviving member is accused of complicity in the murder of eight men of Turkish origin, one man of Greek descent and a police officer.

Alongside the large number of asylum seekers in the country as a whole, the relatively low level of migration in Dresden and the CDU's traditionally negative view of immigration, it is not difficult to see why there is considerable potential for mobilisation in Dresden.

But if PEGIDA is to gain nationwide momentum, it will have to spread beyond its epicentre. It will need to mobilise similar numbers in other key cities, including in the West – which is traditionally more accustomed to immigration and more open to it.

So far, the movement has not gained any meaningful traction beyond the region and indeed, counter demonstrations have been held across the country, with protesters wielding signs expressing sympathy for asylum seekers and proclaiming Germany open to migrants.

In Dresden, protesters chanted “Wir sind das Volk” (“We are the people”); but there is little sign outside the city, so far, that they speak for the body of the German public.

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