

Spurred by Paris attacks, anti-Islam protest surges in Dresden

by [Sara Miller Llana](#)

January 13, 2015

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) A march that drew 4 million citizens and 50 world leaders to the streets of France on Sunday was a clear call for cohesion across Europe in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris.

But the massive anti-Islamization march in Dresden one day later—where the weekly event drew its largest attendance yet—suggests the fraternity is fraying in many folds of the region.

“Yesterday Paris, tomorrow Berlin, no to religious fanaticism,” read one flag Monday night in a sea of German flags supporting the new group, known by its acronym for the “Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West,” or Pegida.

German leaders urged Pegida marches to stay home, and not co-opt the Paris tragedy for their own gain. But many in the crowd were defiant. A customs agent who would only give his first name as Peter waved a giant French flag from a wooden pole, saying he has the right to be here to pay homage to the victims of France—and express his fears about the inherent risks of rapid multicultural change in German society.

“I want my children to grow up in a Christian country,” he said. “The attack in Paris just confirmed our fears about the risks of Islamization in Europe.”

Amid economic stagnation, rapidly changing demographics, and very real threats of terrorism that still plague Western nations, many fear that an intolerance and exclusion that has been building on the edges of European society will permeate it to its core.

Populists across Europe are increasingly willing to take to the streets and express that sentiment. The words at the Pegida rally tonight would have been considered unheard of in any German city, even just six months ago.

“There is a greater awareness that you can’t conflate everything with terrorism. But at the same time you have the populist movements that represent the views of a large amount of people, that didn’t express themselves before,” says Schirin Amir-Moazami, a professor at Berlin Free University's Institute of Islamic Studies. “There is a physical expression of an aversion that was already there.... [Last week's tragedy in] Paris nourishes all the sentiments . . . and you don’t know in what direction it will go.”

### **'We are the people'**

The first test of unity has come in Dresden. Some 25,000 poured into the streets tonight, according to police estimates, a huge response in a steadily growing movement. Last week's march set a now-broken record at 18,000. In October, at their first march, just 300 showed up.

Protesters' message to those who discouraged Monday's demonstration: “We are not the killers from Paris, we are the people,” as one sign read.

Most of the protesters, who refuse to give names—especially last names—loathe the media and erupted into applause when their leaders talked about new immigration laws for the country, living in a decent and peaceful society, and living free from fanatics. “We are the people,” they chanted.

Their fears about Islamization of Europe are hard to understand since, statistically speaking, few Muslims live in the state of Saxony, where Dresden lies. In fact, most observers say radical Islam was just the catalyst for a whole range of gripes, from globalization to disillusionment with mainstream politics to even Germany’s position against Russia in the Ukraine crisis.

“Pegida is a roof and there are many people under it. They have many different problems,” says Frank Richter, director of Saxony’s state office for political education. “They just want to protest. They needed to say something.”

That’s one reason they’ve taken the rally cry from 1989—“we are the people”—and voice it so often at their weekly Monday marches.

### **Repercussions for German politics?**

But the terrorist attacks have created new urgency for bridging Dresden's many divides, which are a microcosm of divisions forming across Europe.

That's why Richter, a former Catholic priest who negotiated between police and protesters during protests in 1989 at the fall of communism, has publicly offered to negotiate between Pegida and mainstream politicians. His office already held one dialogue—last week, prior to the terrorist attack—from both sides, and they had to turn away 30 people because there wasn't enough space. They have two more scheduled in coming days.

"There is a danger that all the different fears, whether of globalization or structural systems, will get projected onto Muslims," he says.

And that could have repercussions for German politics as it has elsewhere in Europe. After Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh, whose works were critical of Islam, was killed by an extremist in 2004, Freedom Party founder Geert Wilders gained ground, and his party is now a major force in Dutch politics.

Alternative for Germany, a growing, anti-euro populist party in Germany, has flirted with Pegida, especially after the Paris attack.

"This bloodbath proves wrong those who laughed or ignored the fears of so many people about a looming danger of Islamism," said Alexander Gauland, a regional AfD leader. "This gives new clout to Pegida demands."

### **Growing discontent**

As Pegida has grown, so has the anti-Pegida movement. A state-organized peace march over the weekend in Dresden garnered 35,000 supporters. "We won't permit that hate will divide us," Helma Orosz, the mayor of Dresden, said Saturday in front of the famed 18th-century Frauenkirche church.

Anti-Pegida signs abound across the city. Tonight the far-left party tried to block Pegida supporters, forming a human barricade across one of the streets they were marching through, but Pegida supporters dwarfed their numbers and easily marched past.

Tomorrow, German Chancellor Angela Merkel is expected to attend a unity march held by Muslims in Berlin. But pleas for unity have backfired before. When she called

for peace and tolerance in a New Year's address, implying Pegida has "hate" in their hearts, she just inflamed them further.

The discontent is obvious in the ranks of Pegida supporters. At an unemployment center in Dresden, one supporter says that politicians aren't listening to them.

"Why do you think all those people are out there on the street? It's not the Nazis," says one woman, declining to give her name. Her hair pulled back in a banana clip with thick blue eyeshadow, she talks with animation, moving in closer as she expresses her views. "They are not solving our problems, and they are taking care of foreigners. It is all out of balance."