

Anti-Islam protest and counterprotest

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) In the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris, the weekly anti-Islam march in Dresden, Germany, drew its largest attendance yet.

German leaders urged supporters of Dresden-based Pegida (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the West) to stay home and not exploit the Paris tragedy for their own gain. But many in the crowd—25,000 according to police estimates—were defiant. A customs agent who would only give his first name as Peter said he has the right to pay homage to the victims of France—and express his fears about the risks of 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.”

The Pegida marches have grown from 300 demonstrators in October. There has also been an increase in counterprotests.

In early January, the Cologne Cathedral, the most visited landmark in Germany, turned off its Christmas season lights as a sign of opposition to Pegida.

“We don’t think of it as a protest, but we would like to make the many conservative Christians [who support Pegida] think about what they are doing,” the dean of the cathedral, Norbert Feldhoff, told the BBC.

In Berlin, city authorities also extinguished the lights at the Brandenburg Gate and the TV tower at Alexanderplatz. Counterprotests against Pegida are growing, both in Dresden and across the country.

“A look at our past and economic sense tells us Germany should not spurn refugees and asylum seekers,” former chancellor Helmut Schmidt wrote in the newspaper *Bild* as part of an anti-Pegida campaign by politicians and public figures.

Germany has seen a surge in asylum applications, including ones from war-torn Syria. And Germany has let the refugees—and many other foreigners—in. Germany is one of the most tolerant nations in Europe, according to this year's Transatlantic Trends survey at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. For example, it had the highest percentage of respondents—31 percent—who endorsed less restrictive refugee policies.

German chancellor Angela Merkel appealed to her country to reject the Pegida movement.

“Do not follow people who organize” such events, she said during her annual New Year's address, “for their hearts are cold and often full of prejudice, and even hate.”

Despite that plea, slightly more protesters showed up January 5 than to the previous protest.

Counterprotests took place in Berlin, Cologne, and Stuttgart. A state-organized peace march in Dresden, on the weekend after the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks, garnered 35,000 supporters.

“We won't permit that hate will divide us,” Helma Orosz, the mayor of Dresden, said January 10 in front of the famed 18th-century Frauenkirche.

Anti-Pegida signs abound across the city. On January 12 supporters of the far-left party tried to block Pegida demonstrators, forming a human barricade across one of the streets. But Pegida supporters easily marched past.

The staying power of Pegida in Dresden underlines a gap between East and West Germany. East Germany faces higher unemployment, exclusion, and, crucially, far lower rates of immigration.

“They have not interacted with [migrants] so much, so that's one reason why they can better project their fears and frustrations onto migrants,” said Hajo Funke, a political science professor at the Free University of Berlin.

Political leaders will have to walk a fine line in response, he said. They will have to “be efficient and responsive to the needs of the people and the respective neighborhoods on one hand,” Funke said, and on the other be “responsive and fair to the refugees who come.”

Like the rest of Europe, Germany has grappled with its nationals returning from the battlefields of Syria and Iraq and posing a domestic security threat. Muslim radicals in Germany also made news in September when a patrol of “Shariah Police,” as they labeled themselves, roamed the streets of the city of Wuppertal to “police” alcohol consumption.

Gary Hochenstein, a 63-year-old who lives an hour outside of Dresden, said his support for Pegida isn’t “official” but that he agrees with most of what they are saying.

“I feel that their mission is to educate people about the dangers of radical Islam and not let the Muslims impose their beliefs on non-Muslims,” he said.

But more than just reflecting fear of Islam, the marches are also about fear of the unknown, said some German observers.

Veit Kuehne, who founded International Friends-Dresden in October 2013, facilitates meet-ups and cultural exchanges to get beyond misunderstandings that arise with the lack of the day-to-day interaction that is more common in Berlin or prosperous West German towns. Many migrants in Dresden, for example, come to study and work and are helping the economy, not hurting the local population.

“In the West, people have lived for so long with foreigners that they have learned they’re not bad,” he said.