

Germans take to the streets to oppose rise of far-right 'pinstripe Nazi' party

The Guardian, 5 January 2015

Thousands of Germans demonstrated in four cities on Monday in opposition to the weekly rallies in Dresden against the perceived “Islamisation” of Europe that have attracted growing numbers of supporters. Organizers of the demonstrations in Berlin, Stuttgart, Cologne and Dresden said they were rallying against racism and xenophobia to instead promote a message of tolerance. Businesses, churches, the city Cologne’s power company and others kept their buildings and other facilities dark in solidarity with the demonstrations against the ongoing protests by the group calling itself Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West, or Pegida.

The square around the Cologne Cathedral was plunged into darkness as thousands joined the demonstration. Cologne Cathedral provost Norbert Feldhoff, told n-tv that shutting down the lights was an attempt to make the Pegida demonstrators think twice about their protest. “You’re taking part in an action that, from its roots and also from speeches, one can see is Nazi-ist, racist and extremist,” he said.

Only about 250 Pegida supporters showed up in Cologne, as compared to about 10 times that number of counter-demonstrators. Similarly in Berlin, police said some 5,000 counter-demonstrators blocked about 300 Pegida supporters from marching along their planned route from city hall to the Brandenburg Gate. Another 22,000 anti-Pegida demonstrators rallied in Stuttgart, Muenster and Hamburg, the DPA news agency reported.

But Pegida’s main demonstration in the eastern city of Dresden, a region that has few immigrants or Muslims, attracted 18,000, according to police. The demonstrations there have been growing from an initial few hundred in October to around 17,500 at a rally just before Christmas. Carrying signs with slogans like “wake up” the crowd chanted “we are the people” and “lying press” as they passed television cameras on Monday.

In uncharacteristically frank words in her New Year’s address, the chancellor, Angela Merkel, urged Germans to stay away from the Dresden rallies. When the Pegida demonstrators chant “we are the people”, Merkel said: “they actually mean ‘you don’t belong because of your religion or your skin.’”

Pegida organiser Kathrin Oertel slammed the speech at the rally Monday, telling the crowd: “In Germany we have political repression again”. “Or how would you see it when we are insulted or called racists or Nazis openly by all the political mainstream parties and media for our justified criticism of Germany’s asylum seeker policies and the non-existent immigration policy,” she asked the cheering crowd.

Pegida has sought to distance itself from the far right, saying in its position paper posted on Facebook that it is against “preachers of hate, regardless of what religion” and “radicalism, regardless of whether religiously or politically motivated”. “Pegida is for resistance against an anti-woman political ideology that emphasizes violence, but not against integrated Muslims living here,” the group said. It has also banned neo-Nazi symbols and slogans at its rallies, though critics have noted the praise and support it has received from known neo-Nazi groups.

Other buildings, including several other churches and a museum, joined Cologne Cathedral in turning off their lights in support of the anti-Pegida demonstrators. In Dresden, carmaker Volkswagen decided to keep its glass-walled manufacturing plant dark, to underscore the company “stands for an open, free and democratic society”.