

## Riots in Saxony – the political consequences

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Riots and demonstrations have been continuing since 26 August in Chemnitz, Saxony after a German citizen was killed by two immigrants one of whom had a series of previous convictions and was scheduled to be deported. Around 8,000 people took part in a 'march of silence' organised by the AfD on 1 September, and around 3,000 people took part in a counter-demonstration. Since the beginning of the street protests, around 40 people have been injured in the clashes. In addition to AfD supporters, the demonstrations included fans of a local football club, the Pro Chemnitz association (which the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Saxony classifies as far-right), and the anti-immigrant organisation Pegida. Their opponents are mainly individuals who have responded to appeals from the radical left organisation Chemnitz Nazifrei and the Evangelical Church of Saxony. They were also joined by prominent politicians from the SPD and the Green Party. Angela Merkel strongly condemned the excesses in Chemnitz, and the Minister of Internal Affairs Horst Seehofer ensured the support of the Federal Police for Saxony. In response to the scale of the riots and the participation of neo-Nazis in them, German musicians on 3 September held a free concert 'against xenophobia' under the slogan 'Wir sind mehr' (There are more of us); the audience reached 65,000 people.

### Commentary

- Anti-establishment right-wing movements demonstrated their ability to act together in Chemnitz. However, one of the side effects was the presence of groups of neo-Nazis among the demonstrators. Left-wing organisations immediately held counter-manifestations. Regardless of what really happened during the riots and the demonstrations, Chemnitz has become a symbol to which all sides of the political dispute in Germany are now referring. For the AfD and right-wing groupings remaining outside parliament, these developments are proof that the government does not have control over the situation in the country and is unable to successfully protect its citizens, and that Angela Merkel's migration policy is a threat to Germany. In turn, the political parties which are part of the establishment have noticed a dangerous increase in the significance of neo-Nazi organisations which use the protests as a platform for promoting themselves, which tarnishes the reputation of Germany. They also accuse the AfD of co-operation with xenophobic organisations.
- According to public opinion polls, 52% of Germans believe that the state institutions are too slow in combating right-wing extremism (41% are of the opposite opinion). 76% of

respondents (including 34% of AfD supporters) believe that right-wing extremists are a threat to German democracy. The media and politicians are in many cases still trying to categorise the protests merely as an effect of the activity of far-right and neo-Nazi groups, resorting to manipulation. The Office of the Prosecutor General of Saxony, for example, has denied the reports that 'foreigner hunts' and acts of lynch justice had taken place. Attempts to label boil down the concerns (for example, about the state's indolence as regards deportation) shared by a section of public opinion as xenophobic cause a sense of exclusion. This, in turn, intensifies the polarisation of the public and radicalisation of the rival camps.

- Alternative for Germany (AfD) has strengthened its position as a result of the developments in Chemnitz. According to a public opinion poll held by the INSA on 3 September, the nationalist-conservative AfD garners more support than the SPD. The AfD's support level is 17% and the SPD's is 16%, the CDU/CSU may count on 28.5% of the votes. If this trend continues, this party may rival the CDU and the SPD for the position of the strongest grouping in Saxony, Brandenburg and Thuringia during the parliamentary elections in these federal states scheduled for 2019.