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Germany: mass demonstrations against the AfD

Kamil Frymark

On 20–21 January, Germany saw a wave of demonstrations against the far-right Alternative for Germany party (AfD). A total of around a million individuals took to the streets (estimates provided by the police and the organisers differ, and fluctuate between 900,000 and 1.4 million attendees). The biggest protests were held in Berlin, Hamburg, Munich and Frankfurt am Main. The rally held in Potsdam was attended by Chancellor Olaf Scholz (SPD), and in a video message President Frank-Walter Steinmeier emphasised that the demonstrators were "defending our republic and our constitution against enemies. They are defending our humanity". Aside from the AfD, all parties represented in the Bundestag supported the demonstrations, which were convened by many different organisers.

This wave of public outrage was triggered by reports published by the investigative journalism organisation Correctiv about a secret meeting of far-right extremists convening various parties which was held in November 2023 in a villa near Potsdam. It was chaired by Martin Sellner, an Austrian national and one of the radical groups' leaders. He presented a plan to carry out the 're-migration' or 'expulsion' (*Vertreibung*) of several million individuals from Germany, both refugees/immigrants and German citizens who support a liberal migration policy. The meeting was attended by several AfD politicians including a close aide to the party's co-leader.

Commentary

- For Chancellor Scholz's government, the protests are an opportunity to regain public confidence and launch a political offensive. The government's low approval rating (around 70% of respondents have a negative opinion of its work) results from several factors, including disputes within the coalition, the refugee crisis and the widespread public belief that the state has lost control of the migration process, as well as opposition to a radical climate policy and economic stagnation. The AfD has been the biggest beneficiary of the present socio-economic situation, and its level of support nationwide has risen to 22%. Increasing numbers of voters are supporting this party despite its increasingly radical demands (see '*Too green, too fast, too dear. The AfD is gaining popularity in Germany*'). For the ruling coalition, the focus on fighting the AfD will be an important element of the campaign ahead of the elections to the European Parliament planned for June 2024. The minister-presidents of Germany's eastern federal states (representing the CDU, SPD and *Die Linke*) will also refer to the demonstrations against the AfD later this year in their contests for re-election, as the AfD's level of support is the highest in these states (running at more than 30% on average).

- Reports about the secret meeting attended by AfD members have inspired those demanding that the party should be banned to intensify their arguments. The proponents of this solution highlight the party's radicalism. German counterintelligence has monitored the AfD for several years, and three federal states (Saxony, Thuringia and Saxony-Anhalt) have designated the party as a 'right-wing extremist' grouping. The ban's opponents have emphasised the formal challenges and the length of time such a procedure would take. Should the AfD be de-legalised, this would not change its level of support among the majority of its voters, while the launch of this procedure could even increase their mobilisation. Another reason for adopting a more sceptical approach to this idea results from two failed attempts to initiate such proceedings with reference to the National Democratic Party of Germany (NPD) back in 2003 and 2017. However, German politicians have increasingly frequently been considering the option of reducing the amount of public funds allocated to the AfD (as was done to the NPD), although this too would require a lengthy legal procedure.
- A political concept for preventing the AfD from coming to power involves a ban on cooperating with this party in whatever form, as other parties have advocated. However, maintaining this '*cordon sanitaire*' will be difficult, which is evidenced by both the controversy surrounding this initiative within the CDU (especially in eastern Germany) and instances of cooperation at the local government level. The Christian Democrats have found that the ban on cooperating with the AfD and *Die Linke*, which was included in the party documents, is posing a major challenge; this has been particularly true in Thuringia, where it may be impossible for the CDU to form a government without these two parties. The Christian Democrats have supported a minority government in that state, led by minister-president Bodo Ramelow (*Die Linke*), to enact several important pieces of local legislation such as the budget law.