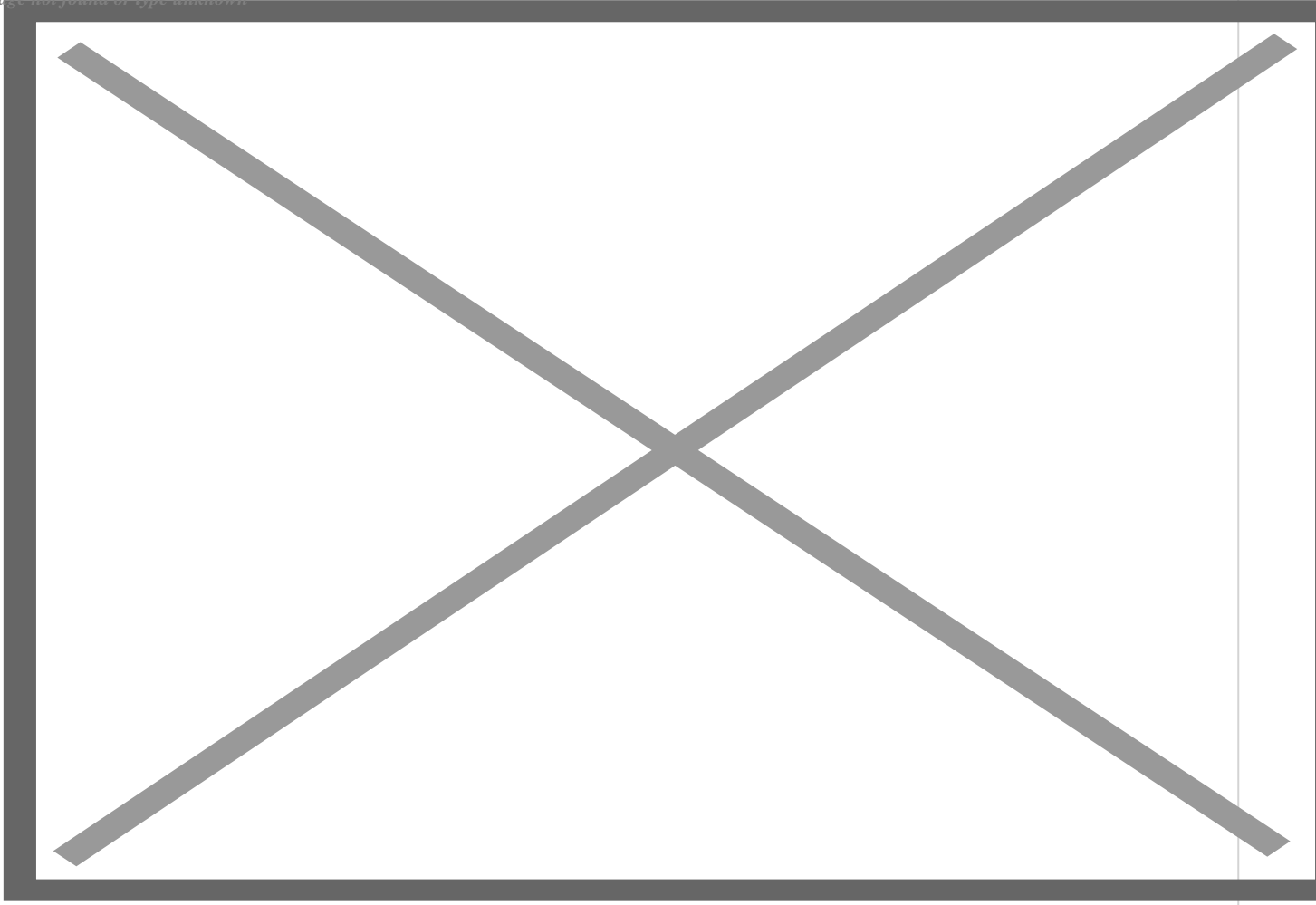


Thousands gather in Germany to protest far-right AfD congress

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A police officer clashes with an activist outside the venue for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party congress in Riesa, Germany, on January 11, 2025 [Matthias Rietschel/Reuters]

Berlin, January 12 (RHC)-- Thousands of protesters shouting "No to Nazis" gathered in the German town of Riesa, where the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party held a key convention approving co-leader Alice Weidel as candidate for chancellor in next month's snap election.

The meeting, which brought 600-odd delegates together on Saturday, eventually got under way two hours behind schedule after police cleared thousands of protesters mounting blockades in the AfD stronghold town, located in the eastern state of Saxony.

Protest organisers, who said 12,000 people from around the country turned up for the demonstration, said police hit groups of demonstrators and used pepper spray to disperse them.

Maria Schmidt, spokeswoman for the protest organisers, said: "Today we are protecting the right of people to live in safety without the fear of deportation or being attacked. "We are all making it clear: Riesa is not a peaceful place for fascism," she said.

Police claimed about 8,000 demonstrators had assembled outside the town's convention center. By late morning, a spokesman said there was "no serious unrest" but that one road on the way to Riesa remained blocked by protesters.

As the congress got under way inside the convention centre, Weidel congratulated her party colleagues for "defying the left-wing mob" while party co-leader Tino Chrupalla accused the demonstrators of acting like "anti-democrats and terrorists".

Analysts say that Weidel – who was this week endorsed by tech billionaire Elon Musk in a livestreamed chat on X – has no realistic chance of becoming Germany's leader in the February 23 election.

While polls show the far-right party in second place, attracting the support of about 20 percent of the electorate, other parties have refused to work with it.

The two-day AfD meeting will see delegates finalising the party's election programme, with one proposed amendment committing the party to a policy of "remigration" – meaning a wide-ranging campaign to expel foreigners from Germany.

Controversy has also been stirred by the party leadership's plans to replace its Junge Alternative ("Young Alternative") youth wing, which has been classified as an extremist group by intelligence services.

A draft version of the manifesto also includes a pledge to leave the euro and a reversal of Germany's exit from nuclear power.

Friedrich Merz, candidate for the mainstream conservative opposition Union bloc that leads polls with about 30 percent, is currently favoured to become the next chancellor. The Union is focusing on boosting Germany's stagnant economy and reducing irregular migration.

At a news conference in Hamburg, Merz focused on bringing "fundamental change" after the unpopular and fractious coalition of centre-left Chancellor Olaf Scholz collapsed in November.

Scholz's coalition government fell apart after he fired his finance minister in a dispute over how to revitalise the economy, leading to an early election. Scholz conceded on Saturday that mistakes were made, but said it was time to look to the future. "Let's fight," he told delegates at a party convention in Berlin, which formally confirmed his nomination as its candidate in a show of hands.



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