

# [***Protests sweep Germany as far-right spots an opening***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B3S-XMK1-JBSS-S07G-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Berlin, Germany (CNN) &#8212; Berlin has nearly been brought to a standstill as thousands of farmers rally against tax rises and subsidy cuts, the culmination of a week of protests that have piled misery on German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's governing coalition.

Streets leading to Berlin's Brandenburg Gate were clogged with trucks and tractors on Monday, as more than 10,000 farmers descended on the capital in conjunction with the German freight industry, police said.

Multiple other protests are planned across the country, which come as Scholz's coalition struggles to fix a budget crisis and [*official data*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/15/economy/germany-gdp-contraction/index.html) showed Germany's economy shrank last year for the first time since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Now, many are warning that the [*far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/24/europe/afd-youth-wing-extremist-label-intl/index.html) is capitalizing on the chaos for its own political gain.

In the shadow of the iconic Brandenburg Gate, a convoy of up to 500 tractors lined up every day last week in freezing pre-dawn temperatures. To keep themselves warm, farmers lit fires and drank hot mugs of tea and coffee.

Major road blockages have stretched across cities from east to west including Hamburg, Cologne, Bremen, Nuremberg and Munich - with up to 2,000 tractors registered for each protest. Images showed convoys of tractors and trucks, some with protest banners, blocking German roads from the early-morning hours.

Outside cities, Germany's fast-moving motorways have also been targeted by protesters, severely disrupting the flow of traffic.

Farmers are enraged about government austerity plans, which would cut tax breaks for agriculture.

Protesters on Monday booed German Finance Minister Christian Lindner, as he tried to tell them, "I hear you, and this is an impressive scene."

At one point, Lindner was interrupted by the president of the farmers union Joachim Rukwied, who urged the crowd to listen to the minister.

CNN spoke to farmers on the ground, who warned the new economic measures will drive them out of business.

"I am here to protest for a new election in this country, because we are in difficulties with our government," Martin, a farmer from Rugen who was protesting in Berlin, said. "They don't hear us, they make regulations that harm every one of us, not only the farmers but everyone in this country. And we think enough is enough."

Steven, a farmer from Western Pomerania who did not give his last name, said: "All the farmers standing here are worried about their livelihoods, about the livelihoods of farmers... This will only stop if the government resigns and there are other solutions."

Scholz's government sparked a backlash in December when it made unexpected changes to a 2024 budget draft, modifying some of its planned subsidy cuts on January 4. Farmers say this doesn't go far enough, however, and are calling for a complete reversal.

Germany's [*AfD party*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/22/europe/europe-populism-far-right-extreme-intl-cmd/index.html) has increasingly made its presence felt at this week's demonstrations.

Some of the tractors have been adorned with AfD posters, reading "Our farmers first" and "Germany needs new elections." Far-right supporters wearing AfD vests could also be seen standing next to the vehicles.

On social media, the AfD's official Facebook page has been reposting images from the protests and writing messages of solidarity with the demonstrators.

"Supporting democratic protests like this against traffic light madness will continue to be a concern of our hearts," one post reads.

"We will stay with you on the road, so that a policy for tax breaks, for supporting our agriculture and for the interests of our own citizens is finally made. The traffic light will soon be standing all alone."

The "traffic light" is a reference to [*Scholz's coalition government*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/08/europe/germany-state-elections-bavaria-hesse-intl/index.html) - an allusion to the colors of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), the Free Democratic Party (FDP) and the Greens it is comprised of.

On his personal Facebook page, the controversial leader of the AfD in the Eastern German state of Thuringia, Bjorn Hocke, launched an appeal: "Fellow citizens, we will see you on the roads!". The far-right politician is classified an extremist by Germany's Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

Other images shared on social media showed members of right-wing extremist groups including The Homeland and Third Way, as well as the AfD, attending a rally in Berlin. In Dresden, a video showed people with flags from the right-wing Free Saxony party clashing with police.

Scholz, meanwhile, failed to address the nationwide demonstrations the entire week. While attending a ceremonial commissioning of a new Deutsche Bahn maintenance depot - Germany's main rail operator - in the city of Cottbus on Thursday, the Chancellor was met with angry protesters.

He refused to engage with them and did not directly address the unrest in a speech he gave at the event - a move which has caused further outrage among farmers who don't believe their voice is being heard by the federal government.

Polarization using existing rifts

For Johannes Kiess, a sociologist specializing in right-wing extremism at the University of Leipzig in eastern Germany, the AfD's involvement in the unrest doesn't come as a surprise.

He points out that although the AfD's own manifesto does not support the interests of Germany's farmers, the far-right party has a history of exploiting division.

"The AfD is trying to fuel the debate further in order to damage the image of democratic institutions and processes, and most importantly the current government," Kiess told CNN.

"To this end, it tries to increase the polarization using existing cleavages like rural versus urban."

He continues: "The AfD used the Eurozone crisis as a window of opportunity to get started in the first place. Activists from the far-right were literally waiting for such an opportunity and with the so-called refugee crisis in 2015 they got a second crisis that helped them grow considerably.

"Migration is known as the bread-and-butter-issue for the far-right. Since then, the AfD has indeed used every crisis to fuel polarization, for example the pandemic, the war against Ukraine. Sometimes it works well, sometimes not."

According to Kiess, the AfD has a clear market-liberal stance advocating for the abolishment of all kinds of subsidies, including those for farmers, directly flying in the face of what the farmers are protesting for.

"And they are against climate friendly subsidies in particular, which could help farmers transform their businesses to make them environmentally and economically more sustainable.

"In fact, the AfD along with the CDU and the governing coalition even voted for the abolishment of the subsidies in question."

The AfD, which has recently enjoyed record-high polling, is hoping for major gains in three eastern state elections this year - Thuringia, Saxony and Brandenburg. Polling data released on Thursday put the party comfortably ahead of its rivals in all three states.

While the regional elections do not directly affect federal ***politics***, they could send a worrying signal to Scholz's SPD-led government ahead of next year's general election.

Far-right coup fantasies

German ministers and a domestic intelligence chief have warned how right-wing extremists could try to exploit the farmers' protests.

Vice Chancellor and Economy Minister Robert Habeck, who experienced the farmers' anger first-hand when a group of protesters tried to storm the ferry he was disembarking last week, has spoken of the far-right's "coup fantasies."

"Calls with coup fantasies are circulating. Extremist groups are forming and nationalist symbols are being openly displayed," Habeck told reporters on Monday.

"It is becoming clear that something has slipped in recent years, which has taken the boundaries off legitimate democratic protest."

Stephan Kramer, head of the domestic intelligence agency in the eastern state of Thuringia, told CNN: "What we have certainly noticed is that extremists - primarily from the far-right - have used the completely legitimate farmers' protests to either accompany these protests with corresponding calls on social media or to encourage their own personnel from the far-right to march with them or to be present on the side-lines.

"And above all, we have seen that the Alternative for Germany in Thuringia, which has been classified as right-wing extremist in Thuringia since 2021, has also very specifically declared its solidarity with the farmers and called for corresponding protest marches."

Kramer added that the farmers' associations themselves have distanced themselves from the far-right. "They have made it very clear that they want nothing to do with them and that they are fighting for their own interests and concerns and do not want to be co-opted by the right-wing extremists."

Similarly, Kiess said that although farmers in Germany tend to be conservative-leaning, the majority do not support the far-right.

"As in all segments of the population, there is also support of the AfD among farmers. However, farmers are known to vote disproportionally more for the conservative CDU/CSU [Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union].

"The current frustration with ***politics*** in general, not just the current government and subsidies for farmers, poses the risk of farmers becoming more susceptible to the far-right as they feed on the anti-establishment theme," he said.

Nadine Schmidt and Claudia Otto reported from Berlin and Sophie Tanno reported from and wrote in London. CNN's Chris Stern, Sebastian Shukla and Benjamin Brown contributed reporting.

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