
'PULSE OF EUROPE': WHAT ARE THE DEMONSTRATIONS ACHIEVING?

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Do you have plans for Sunday afternoon? It has become a show of good form amongst some middle-class groups of friends to take part in pro-European demonstrations on Sunday afternoons. There, friends wave blue EU flags, join hands with other convinced Europeans to sing the European anthem, and sometimes even spontaneously declare their love for the EU on an open mic. Participation in "Pulse of Europe" demonstrations has become a Sunday ritual in many cities across Germany and the rest of Europe.

Thousands demonstrating

There is no doubt that the citizens' movement "Pulse of Europe" has excited many people who are no longer content to complain about Europe and cede the citizens' protest format to PEGIDA and other right-wing populist groups. Since the movement started at the beginning of the year, tens of thousands of pro-European citizens have taken to the streets. The initiative was founded in reaction to Brexit and the election of Donald Trump, by a married couple from Frankfurt, both of whom are practicing lawyers. They say those events made it clear to them that "the impossible really can happen."

Meanwhile, the pro-European protest movement has branches in 70 German cities. People in Brussels, Paris, Amsterdam and 20 other European cities also spend Sunday afternoons protesting.

However, as the movement's popularity grows, more people are also asking: What do demonstrators actually want? What can "Pulse of Europe" achieve?

Criticism: vague demands

Political scientist Ulrike Guerot, a professor for European politics and a democracy researcher at Danube University Krems in Austria, also posed that question while speaking with DW. She thinks that "Pulse" is generally something positive, but says its ten-point thesis is too vague.

The movement's manifesto has been published on its website:

1. Europe must not fail
2. Peace is at stake
3. We are responsible

4. Get up and vote
5. Basic rights and the rule of law are inviolable
6. European fundamental freedoms are non-negotiable
7. Reforms are necessary
8. Take mistrust seriously
9. Diversity and joint qualities
10. We all can, and should, join together

These are generalizations that many people can identify with, but political scientist Guerot says they are too vague. She believes the problem with the movement is that it seeks to defend Europe on the basis of values such as freedom and democracy. But proclaiming a commitment to the EU as it is right now seems like "the protection of vested rights," and that simply isn't enough. Guerot says: "If things were functioning properly, people would not have to take to the streets."

[Flash-Galerie Bildergalerie Das bewegte die Welt im Jahr 2011 Jahresrückblick national 2011 Macht der Finanzmärkte (picture-alliance/dpa)]

Occupy supporters in 2011 at a demonstration in front of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt

Post-occupy soufflé

Protest researcher Wolfgang Kraushaar, from the Hamburg Institute for Social Studies, has also been unable to identify concrete demands. He predicts that "'Pulse of Europe' is in danger of becoming a soufflé movement, one that just collapses at some point." He argues that while currently riding a wave of acceptance, the movement is hardly capable of integrating itself into any real political process. In the end, it could well suffer the same fate as the anti-globalization "Occupy" movement – and simply run out of steam.

Kraushaar says the concept of constant mobilization cannot work in the long-term. Although it is possible that the prospect of Marine Le Pen winning the French presidency or Alternative for Germany (AfD) winning seats in Germany's federal parliament may motivate people, he asks, "What happens after that?"

Successful emotionalization

Stephanie Hartung, a founding member of the "Pulse of Europe," told Germany's "Tagesschau" public television news show: "We are intentionally taking a broad stance in terms of content. We are getting people excited about dealing with Europe. That isn't vague, it's important, and it's the right thing to do."

Bonn-based political scientist Ludger Kühnhardt, director of the Center for European Integration Studies (ZEI), agrees with Hartung, and says he sees no lack of content. "Pulse of Europe" is a good initiative according to Kühnhardt. "It was high time that people in Europe raised their voices in protest to the apocalyptic mood of the day. It helps to emotionally charge the idea of Europe." Kühnhardt says that the movement has been successful in bringing about that emotionalization.

It does indeed appear as if those taking to the streets are excited about an EU that has long been ridiculed as a bureaucratic monster. The simple slogan "Stand Up For Europe" has been enough to attract thousands of citizens to city squares on Sundays. So far, more cities are joining in each week.

Pulse of Europe has succeeded in emotionally charging the idea of Europe.

Equal rights for all Europeans

Whether "Pulse of Europe" is a flash in the pan or a real social movement remains to be seen. "One has to wait and see what happens," says political scientist Guerot. Her prognosis is that the movement will not have a future without concrete political demands. She has given a lot of thought to what such demands might be. And Guerot proposes one that she feels would make sense: equal rights for all European citizens. A general principle of equality that would apply to taxation, voting and social rights across the whole of Europe. She says that in the long run, Europe needs a new democratic foundation.

Guerot hopes that if things go well "Pulse of Europe" might provide the impetus for reforms. "Politicians have been terrified even to speak about Europe." At least that much has changed, and Guerot says that in itself is "brilliant."

Kaynak/Source: