

Consequences of the Berlin blackout

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On 3 January, there was an attack on the power grid in Steglitz-Zehlendorf, one of Berlin's southern districts. Following the arson of a cable bridge, around 45,000 households – approximately 100,000 people – and over 2,200 businesses lost power, including 74 care homes for the elderly and the ill. The power outage, which lasted several days, was the longest in the city since 1945. A so-called major state of emergency was declared. Numerous NGOs and around 40 Bundeswehr soldiers took part in the relief effort. Berlin's Economy Minister, Franziska Giffey (SPD), who is also responsible for energy matters, announced that the city would cover hotel accommodation costs for those who made use of them. A temporary repair was only completed on 7 January. The far-left extremist group Vulkangruppe claimed responsibility for the attack, and the authorities have confirmed the authenticity of the group's statement. The group cited its motivation as a desire to strike at capitalism and reduce environmental pollution. The Federal Prosecutor has launched an investigation into sabotage targeting the constitutional order, arson, disruption of public utilities, and membership in a terrorist organisation.

Attacks on critical infrastructure in Germany are becoming increasingly frequent. Authorities blame both external actors – including Russia, China, and Iran – and the far-left. The blackout in Berlin is expected to intensify the federal debate on infrastructure security. The widely criticised crisis management by Mayor Kai Wegner (CDU) may weaken his chances of re-election in the September elections.

Commentary

- **The method of attack and the choice of location indicate a high level of professionalism on the part of the saboteurs.** Steglitz-Zehlendorf is an affluent residential district of Berlin – it formed part of the American Sector after World War II. Counterintelligence believes that the arson targeting a specific section of infrastructure in this district was carried out by the far-left extremist group Vulkangruppe, which has been active in Brandenburg and Berlin since 2011. The group operates as a conglomerate of dispersed, non-hierarchical and mutually independent cells, which makes the investigation particularly difficult. As a result, no suspects have been detained to date, including in connection with previous attacks. The most serious actions attributed to the organisation in recent months include the arson of a transmission tower and the resulting power outage at Tesla's factory near Berlin (March 2024), as well as a similar attack on the southeastern district of Treptow-Köpenick and the Adlershof technology park (September 2025). At the same time, speculation has emerged in the media about possible foreign state involvement in instigating these acts. However, German security services consider

this unlikely.

- **The manner in which Mayor Wegner handled the crisis has been widely criticised and may prove detrimental to his political career.** The most serious accusations concern his failure to visit the districts affected by the blackout and his false claims regarding the coordination of relief efforts. It quickly emerged that, on the day of the attack – a Saturday afternoon – he had been playing tennis. As a result, there have been calls for the mayor's resignation, and the opposition has announced plans to establish an inquiry in the Berlin House of Representatives, which could seriously threaten his chances of re-election. Senator Giffey is capitalising on the situation; her presence on the ground and effective coordination have helped her cultivate an image of a capable leader ahead of the September Landtag elections. The crisis has also benefited the opposition party AfD, which was the only political party to provide assistance to residents in a coordinated manner.
- **The blackout is set to fuel the debate on crisis management in Germany.** In Berlin, authorities were criticised for their delayed response and the districts' insufficient preparedness for a prolonged outage – including, for example, an inadequate number of power generators. There were also reports of difficulties in transporting patients and accommodating elderly residents. However, cooperation between the police and fire services was assessed positively. Civil protection in crisis situations falls under the jurisdiction of the federal states, which apply highly varied approaches. For some time, there have been renewed calls across Germany for a thorough modernisation of the system – particularly in terms of increased funding, equipment procurement, and investment in communications and logistics. A second key challenge lies in improving coordination between the federal centre, the states, and local authorities: standardising procedures, conducting joint assessments, and strengthening societal resilience through education and regular drills.
- **The attack is likely to lead to a tightening of the proposed amendment to the Umbrella Act for Critical Infrastructure Protection (KRITIS-Dachgesetz), currently under consideration in the Bundestag.** The draft legislation aims to clarify the definition of critical infrastructure operators and impose an obligation on companies and certain public institutions to conduct risk assessments and prepare contingency plans for sabotage, attacks, or natural disasters. The amendment also introduces standardised rules for reporting major disruptions and strengthens the role of federal authorities – including the Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance. In addition, each federal state will be required to establish a central body responsible for implementing the new regulations.