

Terrorist attacks, major incidents and critical infrastructure. Observations from Berlin

Dramatic security incidents, such as terrorist attacks, generate widespread public interest. They arouse strong emotions, on the wave of which there are appeals to the authorities to counter threats more effectively, passionate demands for changes and declarations of their introduction. This usually lasts for a few months and then the topic goes quiet. In the interview, **PAUL FRÖHLICH** from the Operations Division of the Berlin Police, an expert in the EU Protective Security Advisors programme, refers to a figurative term for this phenomenon - disaster dementia. He suggests ways to counter it, mentioning, among other things, the lessons learned and lessons identified by the Berlin police after the terrorist attack on the Berlin Christmas market. He emphasises the importance of being prepared for crises not only at national but also at individual level and the role of institutional and non-institutional cooperation.

Damian Szlachter: In June 2024, various German politicians told the media and the public that there were no indications of concrete terror plans, but that there was a high “abstract threat situation”. Who determines the terrorist threat level in Germany? Are decisions made at central or regional level?

Paul Fröhlich: The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany establishes that the majority of police competences reside with the 16 federal states. Additionally, there are federal police forces with special jurisdictions. For example, the Federal Criminal Investigation Department (Bundeskriminalamt – BKA) carries out various central tasks, including assessments of the threat situation related to terrorism. The respective states may adapt the assessments formulated at federal level, but in most cases the evaluations of the BKA are followed. The system has generally proven effective, particularly because the situation can vary significantly from state to state. Unlike some other EU member states, Germany does not use numerical terrorism threat levels, but rather employs descriptive terms. It is up to the individual states to respond to these threats. The actions of the relevant authorities naturally correspond with the evolving situation, whether it is becoming more or less tense. The federal police may support these activities.

What does building social and business resilience to terrorist attacks look like, what is the role of the German Police in this matter?

I would like to respond with a memorable example. In the summer of 2016, the German Federal Minister of the Interior held a press conference where he presented a guide for emergency preparedness and correct action in emergency situations. The focus was primarily on personal preparedness and stockpiling, which makes sense for various situations or crises. Contrary to all professional expectations, this press event received a lot of criticism, and it was accused of exaggerated scaremongering. It was absurd because this guide had existed for many years and only an update was being presented. A few years later, it would have certainly been beneficial in Germany if parts of the population (and parts of the media) had reacted more appropriately, thus reducing panic buying at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whether in the context

of such crises or terrorist attacks, this shows how important it is to communicate appropriate recommendations to the public in a timely, understandable, calm, but also honest manner. In this context, I find the step taken in Sweden in 2018 quite impressive. At that time, all households were made aware with the brochure “IF CRISIS OR WAR COMES”. Also, the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB) now offers an interesting online course on terrorism preparedness in public spaces.

But back to Germany, my personal opinion is that the events of the recent years have led to only a slightly improved understanding among the public that not only state preparedness but also personal preparation for emergencies and crises is necessary. However, this is undoubtedly insufficient. In addition, something that Albrecht Broemme, the renowned former Fire Chief of Berlin, likes to call “disaster dementia” occurs. Broad interest, outrage, and the drive to make a positive change typically last only a few months after a severe incident and then fade in public (and political) awareness. What can the police do in this regard? Generally, the police can offer recommendations, advice and guidelines for the public in this context. Of course, they also play an important role in crisis communication, along with other actors.

And increasing the resilience of economic entities?

As for the economy and its resilience, one might need to differentiate a bit. While it is possible for (large) corporations to implement more extensive measures, such as having a Chief Security Officer with appropriate staff, considering aspects of cybersecurity, and preparing for Business Continuity Management, this is often not possible, or at least not to a comparable extent, for medium-sized or smaller companies.

Following the European CER Directive (Critical Entities Resilience Directive – editor’s note), a corresponding law for critical infrastructures is planned and already drafted in Germany. When it comes into effect, it will particularly regulate their physical protection and introduce mandatory minimum standards nationwide. Another central element is to be the reporting system for significant disruptions, which will also serve to quickly respond to potential

or actual threats. Through these and further coordinated efforts, a robust defence against different types of risks - whether natural or man-made - is to be ensured.



Photo: Paul Fröhlich from the Operations Division of the Berlin Police (left) and Damian Szlachter from Counter-Terrorism Centre of the Internal Security Agency are experts in EU Protective Security Advisors programme.

Source: own materials.

What types of facilities can count on support in the field of terrorist prevention from law enforcement agencies and special services?

Depending on the specific occasion, there can be direct contact and exchange between the requesting facilities and the police or other authorities or services. This includes the provision of information, assessing threats, recommendations for behaviour, and possibly consultations on protection, especially physical protection. If necessary, temporary protective measures by the police can also be implemented. Generally, there are facilities with which special information exchange as well as advice and further measures take place. Notably, these include diplomatic facilities (embassies, consulates and the like), some places of worship, government buildings, public transport as well as critical infrastructures. With

the UEFA EURO 2024 taking place in Germany, stadiums and some other accommodations are also involved. Additionally, there is also an exchange with some organisations, associations, and other forums through which relevant official information and assessments are distributed to various stakeholders.

What is the biggest challenge for the Berlin Police in countering terrorist threats?

The overall challenge is likely to be obtaining relevant and reliable information about such threats in a timely manner, in order to then take the appropriate measures. This is such a general answer that it probably applies not only to Berlin. Berlin is a capital city and the largest city in the European Union (although only since Brexit). This naturally poses a special challenge for the Berlin Police – and also for the Federal Police deployed in Berlin. However, there are certain structures here that help: a really high police density, the largest professional fire brigade in Germany, 37 hospitals for emergency hospitalisation, selected units with CBRN/HazMat capabilities, and much more.

From my perspective, there is a challenge – and again this is likely not unique to Berlin – that sometimes does not receive enough attention. In addition to special units and special investigative units, it is extremely important that the first responders are well-prepared for such operations. This of course includes training and protective equipment, but it also involves designing coherent concepts to enhance operational action. Moreover, there should ideally be no discontinuities between the actions of first responders, riot police, and special units. In this context, the important work of paramedics must also be recognised and made feasible. A lot of work has been done on these points in Berlin in recent years and this is still ongoing.

Was the impetus for the intensification of work provided by the 2016 terrorist attack in Berlin? What preventive measures were implemented after this tragic event?

The evening of 19 December 2016 caused a shock. A terrorist attack on a Berlin Christmas market at Breitscheidplatz killed 13 people and injured many. In December 2020, the European Commission

presented an Agenda for Counter-Terrorism consisting of four pillars - Anticipate, Prevent, Protect and Respond. In the same month, the federal state of Berlin introduced an anti-terrorism plan named "SAVE", which includes preventive and reactive measures. It also has four main pillars - Protection, Clearing up, Prevention and Containment. *Protection* is understood as the implementation of security measures, especially for the protection of public spaces and critical infrastructure. This also includes security research and additional technical equipment for police officers and investigators. *Clearing up* means early identification and clarification of Islamist networks and activities. This encompasses improving the early warning system as well as intensifying and networking law enforcement. *Prevention* refers to efforts to counteract radicalisation through educational, integration, and deradicalisation initiatives. *Containment*, on the other hand, is understood as minimising the impact of potential terrorist attacks. It includes preparation for handling terrorist attacks, the swift and effective response of operational units, and psychosocial emergency care for victims and affected parties.

Was there also an organisational dimension to the solutions introduced?

Training and exercises have been intensified in the Berlin Police, including joint activities with the fire department and emergency medical service. Some units have been better equipped materially and personnel-wise. Operations Division has established new permanent command groups that can lead operations due to exceptional situations. A new command and control structure for certain major incidents has been developed, which can be used by incident commanders like a template and has proven particularly effective in both drills and real situations in Berlin. This has been a real game-changer. It is popular among operational forces too, maybe because the centrepiece is presented very concisely as a one-pager. Additionally, several other concepts were developed and existing training and operational concepts for countering offenders were revised.

Which initiatives of your institution are worthy of being implemented at the EU level as universal, exemplary?

Although there are certainly some successful good or better practice approaches at the Berlin Police, I would like to start by flipping the perspective. In my view, it is fantastic what the Berlin Police has already learned from other EU member states and I would like to mention at least one example. The so-called Quick Identification Teams (QIT) are used in the Netherlands during attacks to very quickly collect crucial evidence at the scene and apply new methods. Colleagues from the Netherlands have greatly supported and trained the Berlin Police, enabling the Berlin Criminal Investigation Department to implement this as well. Something from the Berlin Police that could be somewhat exemplary are our revised designed structure for command and control and essential measures, which have proven very effective in the early phase of a major incident. In both exercises and real situations, it has proven to be useful, effective, and flexible enough. However, these are procedures that take into account significant specifics of Berlin and therefore cannot be fully transferred to all major cities in Germany, nor to large parts of the EU member states. Additionally, I would like to point out that the Berlin Police was significantly involved in a previous EU project. As part of the SafeCi (Safer Space for Safer Cities) project, a manual with six key topics and several good practices was created and made available.

You have been active in national security structures as well as those at EU level for many years. So in conclusion, I would like to ask you what do you think has a real impact on increasing the resilience of facilities to terrorist attacks?

Well, that also depends on the specific facility. Threats or attacks can occur across different dimensions or layers: on land, in the air, in water, or via cyber. So, it really matters what the specific facility is, as a port requires some different solutions or measures compared to a ministry or a gas storage facility.

To answer the question, I can list some points that may sound a bit “old-fashioned“, but these classics have proven themselves for decades and will surely remain “in fashion“ for the next years. One of them is unauthorised access that should be made impossible

or at least very difficult. Another is using suitable means for early detection of intruders or disturbances. The next point concerns relevant information. They should be quickly gathered, verified and shared with relevant parties. Finally, the countermeasures to be taken. They can be technical in nature, which in many cases will require the presence of (security) personnel. In my experience, this is sometimes underestimated. And one has to ask oneself what good is knowing about a situation to the second if there are simply no (or too few) designated forces to deploy and to handle it?

I would like to emphasise two additional things that I notice in my work. Firstly, it is very valuable that there are mechanisms for concrete mutual support – both nationally and within the EU. This includes the exchange of threat pictures and other relevant information and the possibility to request special equipment, special units, or other units as needed. Secondly, I am very pleased that expertise, methods, and tools are being shared and jointly improved. There are several EU reports, guidelines, and other products that can be directly applied or adapted to specific needs. One example is the “EU quick guide to support the protection of places of worship.” Additionally, the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission is expanding the promising “Software as a Service” approach and making tools available online. Their development was and is made possible with taxpayers’ money, and if interested, these tools can then be provided to member states at no additional cost.

I am only aware of the above points because they were shared with me during training and workshops as part of the EU PSA (Protective Security Advisor) programme. These events also facilitate direct and trusted exchange and sharing of specific experiences from various experts from EU member states.

By the way, I learned about “TERRORISM – studies, analyses, prevention” at such events, and I am pleased to now have the opportunity to contribute to it.

So, finally, *dziękuję* (Paul says *thank you* in Polish - editor’s note). I wish us all success in preventing as well as countering terrorism and other challenges, and in 2024 of course, I also wish for successful and peaceful major sports events in Germany, France, and all other countries.

Interviewed by: Damian Szlachter

Paul Fröhlich

He is a Protective Security Advisor (EU PSA) and part of a corresponding pool of experts founded by the European Commission (DG HOME). Since 2019, he has held a teaching position at the Berlin School of Economics and Law.

He has 28 years of service with the Berlin Police (currently in Operations Division), with responsibilities in relation to major incident proceeding. This includes conceptualisation, command and control, enabling exercises, projects and working groups, primarily focusing on attacks, mass casualty incidents and related major incidents.

The opinions expressed by Paul Fröhlich are purely personal and do not represent the official position of authorities mentioned above.

Useful links



Counter terrorism and radicalisation | 2020 Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU (English)

https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation_en

Berlin Anti-Terror-Plan „SAVE“ – Berlin Plan to counter Islamist Radicalisation and Terrorism 2020 (German) | Berlin Senate Department for the Interior and Sport

<https://www.berlin.de/sen/inneres/presse/weitere-informationen/artikel.1032697.php>



Press conference „Berlin Anti-Terror Plan“ from December 18, 2020 (German) | Berlin Senate Department for the Interior and Sport

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zp002466ugM>

Guide for Emergency Preparedness and Correct Action in Emergency Situations (English) | Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK)

https://www.bbk.bund.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Mediathek/Publikationen/Buergerinformationen/Ratgeber/ratgeber-englisch-disasters-alarm.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=12



The brochure If Crisis or War Comes (English) | Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB)

<https://www.msb.se/en/rad-till-privatpersoner/the-brochure-if-crisis-or-war-comes/>

Online Course on Terrorism Preparedness in Public Spaces (Swedish) | Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB)

<https://webbutbildning.msb.se/utb/terrorberedskap-internt/>



QIT – Quick Identification Team (Dutch) | Dutch Defence Press

<https://www.dutchdefencepress.com/qit/>

SafeCi – Safer Space for Safer Cities – Trailer, Information & Handbook (English) | Polizei Berlin

<https://www.berlin.de/polizei/aufgaben/praevention/safeci/artikel.786181.en.php>



Data and Tools to Counter Terrorism & Newsletter (English) | European Commission – Joint Research Center (JRC)

<https://counterterrorism.ec.europa.eu/>

EU quick guide to support the protection of places of worship (available in 23 languages) | European Commission

https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/whats-new/publications/eu-quick-guide-support-protection-places-worship_en



EU Protective Security Advisors (English) | European Commission

https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/protection/eu-protective-security-advisors-eu-psa_en