

# Spending cuts exacerbate weather chaos in Europe

Markus Salzmann  
28 December 2010

The unusually cold winter at a time when many governments are introducing spending cuts has resulted in chaotic conditions and numerous deaths in wide parts of Europe.

Most forms of transport have faced disruption across the continent in recent days and weeks. At airports in Britain, Germany, France, Belgium and the Netherlands, tens of thousands of passengers have been forced to wait as flights were delayed for hours or were cancelled. From Paris to Brussels, hundreds of travellers whose flights were grounded by icy weather in Europe spent Christmas Day in airport queues after sleeping overnight on camp beds in terminals.

In the case of some of the continent's main airports, such as Britain's Heathrow and France's Charles de Gaulle, one of the main problems was a lack of de-icing fluid. At least 300 people slept on military-style beds at Charles de Gaulle airport after around 400 flights were cancelled. After using all existing supplies, airport authorities were forced to import extra deliveries of glycolde from Germany and United States.

In the days before Christmas, Heathrow was forced to close its runways leading to the stranding of hundreds of thousands of passengers. Despite prior claims by airport authorities that it was well equipped to deal with bad weather, with 60 snow-clearing vehicles at its disposal, the winter storms of the past weeks led to a complete breakdown of services at the airport.

In the event, it turned out that the airport had just 10 vehicles capable of shifting snow from runways and that its contingency plans for bad weather were calculated on the basis of snowfalls of not more than one inch. The airport management was also forced to order fresh supplies of de-icer from European and American suppliers.

The airport's completely inadequate contingency

"snow plan" had been drawn up earlier this year in conjunction with the British Transport Ministry. The aim of the plan was to avoid the sort of chaos that plagued British airports last year.

In Frankfurt, almost half of some 1,300 flights had been cancelled by Sunday evening, according to a spokesman. London Heathrow, Europe's largest passenger airport, remained largely closed until Monday after heavy snowfall left thousands of passengers stranded. Dozens of passengers were forced to sleep, some under foil blankets, on the hard floor in the transit area. The shutdown of this vital hub in London affected many travellers from around the world who were stuck at Heathrow, unable to continue or begin their journeys.

Traffic jams affected motorways, forcing many travellers onto the railways, which also faced cancellations and massive delays. Many cities saw significant disruption to public transport systems.

In Scotland, Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson had to resign following his catastrophic management of the crisis. In Edinburgh, trains were halted and airports closed. In mid-December, the army was mobilised to clear streets of thick ice and snow and free trapped residents from their homes. In some parts of the city, snow lay 75 centimetres (30 inches) deep.

In some regions of Greece, schools were closed due to the onset of winter. Many roads were passable only with snow chains; strong winds halted ferry services across the northern Aegean.

The Association of German Chambers of Industry and Commerce (DIHK) estimates that the harsh winter has cost German industry around €3 billion. In particular, transport and construction, which have already experienced weak growth, will be further hit.

The severe winter conditions have clearly revealed

how public infrastructure is suffering as a result of the profit-grubbing of private companies. This is very clear at national railway company Deutsche Bahn (DB), which pushed through cutbacks for years in order to successfully float this former state-owned enterprise on the stock market.

The cuts introduced by former DB CEO Hartmut Mehdorn are now exacting their price, and the current railway chief, Rüdiger Grube, has already announced that there would be no new investment in rolling stock before 2015.

Last year, there was widespread criticism of the arrangements covering subcontractors hired by Deutsche Bahn to clear the tracks and stations of snow and ice, with some workers earning minimum wage for carrying out this vital job. Chronic understaffing also means it is not always possible to keep trains running in the face of heavy snowfall.

The most serious impact of the winter has been in eastern Europe. Although there are few reliable statistics, it is likely that the number of cold-related deaths will increase sharply in comparison to last year.

By early December, 80 people had died in Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Lithuania. Most of the victims were homeless, according to authorities, with the majority of the victims in Poland.

It is thought that at least 300,000 people live on the streets in Poland, but the exact figure is unknown because the government does not keep statistics on homelessness. The authorities talk of 3,000 homeless people in Warsaw alone; the street paper *Homo Mizerus* puts the number of 9,000, three times higher. Two thirds of them are migrants from Belarus or Ukraine, seeking a better life.

Despite these numbers, a mere 19 reception facilities and shelters in the Polish capital provide a total of 1,900 places for the homeless.

In Russia, there were also many cold-related deaths in December. There were 11 deaths in Moscow, where temperatures in the first week of December fell to minus 50 degrees Celsius (minus 45 degrees Fahrenheit). The number of deaths in the rest of the country is unclear.

The increase of cold-related deaths in eastern Europe is directly attributable to the radical austerity measures being enforced by each respective government. In Romania, where the government of Prime Minister

Emil Boc has pushed through massive attacks on wages, thousands of families cannot pay their heating bills. Dramatic cuts in health care and other social services are also contributing to the misery.

In Vaslui, a 14-year-old boy who had to walk miles to school in icy temperatures was treated for frostbite. The boy, who comes from a very poor family, was not even wearing socks.

Despite temperatures falling well below zero, many schools are not heated since the municipal authorities are unable to pay the heating bills. Thousands of households have no heating or hot water because they are in arrears with the utility companies. In Targoviste, two babies froze to death in an unheated apartment.

Here, too, it is the homeless who are hardest hit. In the capital Bucharest, according to official figures—and they cannot possibly give a true picture of the actual conditions—there are about 5,000 homeless people. The figure for the whole country is said to be 15,000. In Bucharest, there are only spaces for about 300 people in homeless shelters, and it is not much better in the rest of the country.

The situation is similar in neighbouring Bulgaria, where many people are without power because a snowstorm damaged transmission lines. In the south and west of the country, cars were abandoned on snowy roads. There have been no reliable statistics produced for years about those falling victim to the cold.



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