

Berlin Senate prepares widescale social and cultural cutbacks

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The last few years in Germany have been marked by drastic austerity measures with funding diverted to finance a massive military build-up. The collapse of the German coalition government will further exacerbate this development. The Berlin state government (Senate), a coalition of the CDU and SPD, is already anticipating the budget cuts to be implemented at a federal level.

The Berlin Senate wants to save three billion euros next year alone. Cuts of at least another 1.8 billion euros are planned for the years 2026 and 2027. To this end, the CDU and SPD have agreed on a fiscal policy freeze, with all budget items to be frozen at the 2025 level. Currently, the city's total budget is around 40 billion euros.

In September, the Senate administrations were instructed to stop making firm funding commitments for 2025. To this end, a "circular letter to secure the 2025 budget" was sent out to all departments, Finance Senator Stefan Evers (CDU) explained. The aim was "not to raise false expectations among recipients of grants and subsidies for the coming year, for example," according to the finance administration.

Former state governments, which were led by the SPD for 22 years and included coalitions involving the Left Party and the Greens, had already made massive cuts in the areas of health, education and social services, making Berlin a centre for widespread poverty.

The drastic nature of the planned cuts is made clear by the statement of a spokeswoman for the finance ministry, who explained: "We have to reduce government spending to a normal, sustainable level after the spending explosion of the last five years."

The state government had already decided on significant cuts for the current year with each

department called upon to reduce its budget by around two percent, saving around 550 million euros.

In the Berlin Senate, there is talk of "the most severe budget crisis since the bank scandal." In 2001, the billions in losses incurred by the state supported Bankgesellschaft Berlin were passed on to the population through brutal austerity measures implemented by the Senate (a coalition of the SPD and the Left Party/PDS) headed by Klaus Wowereit (SPD). Today, much more far-reaching cuts are on the agenda under even more stringent conditions.

The Senate is currently deciding on the specific cuts behind closed doors and they will not be made public until the end of November. Little has been revealed so far. What is certain, however, is that almost all areas will be affected by the cuts.

There are to be massive savings in the sector of education and child care. Berlin schools are already no longer allowed to book school trips. Senator for Education Katharina Günther-Wünsch (CDU) justified this by saying that it was necessary to stabilise the budget. Here, both the costs for the teachers involved are to be saved, as are subsidies for poor families. Around 30 percent of pupils from poorer families were until recently entitled to these subsidies. Other costs for business trips and trips for teachers are also to be cancelled.

Further savings are planned for the renovation of schools and daycare centres, which are in a dilapidated state across the board. New buildings could be smaller than planned. According to press reports, the additional construction of urgently needed daycare centres could be cancelled.

The twelve Berlin music schools are particularly affected. The permanent employment of 1,800 teachers, which is laid down by law, has been delayed for

months. Finance Senator Evers has stated that funds would only be made available if they were financed by reducing the services offered by the music schools. As a result, about 25 to 30 percent of music students would lose their places. Around 18,000 students would be affected.

Severe cuts are also expected in the areas of health and social services. Around 40 health care institutions and similar independent organisations have already submitted a document to the Senate, as they justifiably fear for their continued funding and survival.

The majority of them provide important services on behalf of the state, such as pastoral care, hospice work, support for people with chronic illnesses or care for people without health insurance. As a rule, these organisations are completely dependent on funding from the state.

For many years and decades, these services have been hopelessly underfunded and it is not uncommon for them to be maintained only through the commitment of employees. But the planned austerity measures threaten to be devastating.

“Even now, public funds for health care for homeless and homeless people and people without health insurance in Berlin are insufficient,” said Peter Bobbert, President of the Berlin Medical Association, warning against destroying the city’s social infrastructure.

The CDU and SPD are also planning severe cuts in the cultural sector. Senator for Culture Joe Chialo (CDU) has so far refused to comment on how much will be saved and where. Overall, the targeted cuts amount to a volume of around 120 million euros.

There are already fierce protests against the planned cuts. In an open letter to the Berlin Senate, the signatories warn of the consequences of drastic cuts. Opera, concert and theatre institutions would have to cut back their operations and reduce jobs, and some would probably have to close. Among the well-known signatories are conductor Daniel Barenboim, actor Lars Eidinger and theatre director Frank Castorf.

The fact that a scenario of well-known concert houses closing is not out of the question was confirmed by the governing mayor Kai Wegner (CDU) as early as the summer of this year. In connection with a possible sale of the Komische Oper, Wegner stated that the situation of the state budget “allows no room for manoeuvre.”

Currently, the renovation of the building, which has been urgent for years, is being postponed again with reference to the alleged necessary savings.

Further cuts are also expected in the area of climate protection, although the city has hardly any significant expenditure here. At the beginning of the year, the so-called climate special fund, which had previously been announced with great fanfare, was scrapped at the instigation of the tax authorities. Now measures such as the planned installation of solar panels on state-owned buildings will also fall victim to the red pencil.

This devastation of the city’s social fabric can only be enforced against the resistance of the population. It is therefore considered certain there will be no cuts affecting the police, secret service and security apparatuses. Interior Senator Iris Spranger (SPD) has spoken out clearly against any savings in this area and has been supported by the entire Senate.



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