

Audit of critical infrastructure protection – Governance and integral risk management

Federal Office for Civil Protection

Key facts

Critical infrastructure protection (CIP) aims to ensure the availability of critical goods and services. Preventive measures should prevent any failure as far as possible, and precautionary and event-specific measures should reduce the impact or accelerate the resumption of normal operations. The 2018–2022 national strategy for the protection of critical infrastructures (CIP strategy) defined various measures for this purpose. CIP is a joint task of the Confederation, cantons and critical infrastructure (CI) operators.

The Swiss Federal Audit Office (SFAO) audited the effectiveness of the overall CIP system and its governance, with a focus on the current CIP strategy.

The strategy was drawn up by the CIP office. However, the framework conditions mean that it only plays a supporting role in implementation. Therefore, there is no guarantee that the vision envisaged in the strategy can be achieved and that the CIP will function in the event of an incident.

Shared responsibilities complicate implementation

The CIP strategy defines CI (sub-)sectors. The federal agencies responsible for each sub-sector are defined; in general this list is non-exhaustive. No overall lead is specified, although none is clearly defined in the respective policy areas either. This results in a lack of overarching responsibility.

In addition to the Federal Office for Civil Protection (FOCP), the national economic supply (NES) is an important key stakeholder. Both organisational units are assigned a coordination role in the subject area.

In terms of disaster and emergency preparation and management, such as for pandemics and power shortages, there is a lack of integrated risk management between the Confederation and the cantons. Nor is there any overview of the necessary measures. The SFAO made a recommendation in this regard.

Assessing the impact of CIP measures difficult

The implementation of the measures defined in the CIP strategy and the resilience reports is monitored by the CIP office. Controlling focuses on the implementation reports (e.g. "The concept has been created"). In the SFAO's view, however, the focus must be on assessing the impact. This aspect should already be integrated in the definition of measures to enable measurability.

Measure 12 of the CIP strategy stipulates that selected CI operators will be connected to the Polycom security radio network. Polycom is intended to guarantee emergency communication between federal offices and the CI operators. The SFAO considers it important that emergency communication with the CI operators is permanently ensured and has issued a recommendation to this effect.

Switzerland is dependent on critical infrastructure operators

The CI operators are not explicitly named and their rights and obligations are poorly formulated. In some cases, specialist legislation contains the legal specifications concerning responsibility.

As a basis for preventive planning at both federal and cantonal level, it is essential to precisely define the CI. The SFAO recommends that the FOCP determine which companies are essential for the functioning of the economy and people's livelihoods, categorise them according to their importance and identify their critical areas and processes.

CIP is important, but the federal system has weaknesses in implementation

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that existing emergency plans were poorly implemented and monitored. It is therefore all the more important that the principle described in the strategy for achieving an adequate and proportionate level of security and operation be anchored in a binding manner. The Federal Council should answer this fundamental question in order to improve the effectiveness of the new CIP strategy.

The CIP area is characterised by its federal structure, the complexity of the (sub-)sectors involved and the legal framework that has evolved over time. The effectiveness of the CIP system as a whole could be significantly strengthened by clarifying responsibilities, anchoring it at the Federal Council level and making the legal basis more binding. Without appropriate measures, the CIP office will remain a supplicant vis-à-vis the federal authorities, cantons and CIP operators. The SFAO has made recommendations in this regard.

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