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Beyond European crisis management – Germany needs a post-coronavirus vision

Germany is emerging from the first phase of the pandemic with some scars, but broadly in good shape. Like most European countries, it was late in addressing the threat posed by the virus and in “thinking European” in its response. Its six-month EU presidency starting in July is bound up with unique challenges as re-opening internal borders and restarting the European economy may well determine whether the Union can hold together. In order to drive the EU’s economic and social recovery forwards, Berlin needs to present a compelling vision for a green and digital post-pandemic Europe worth striving for.

To some international commentators, Germany’s handling of coronavirus is commendable. With far fewer deaths than France, Italy or the UK and with huge sums of financial support, the country appears to be weathering the storm well. Add to this the calm leadership of the “crisis chancellor” Angela Merkel and it is easy to see why Germany would be “top of the class” (The Economist, though with a question mark).

Germany may not be so different after all, however. Pandemic contingency plans were either not in place or not followed. Its social distancing orders were late in coming and lenient by European standards. The country’s comparably high testing rate is thanks to the capacity of private laboratories, not government action. Perhaps it all comes down to “dumb luck“ (Politico) rather than real achievements – the forewarning from northern Italy, a large number of young and healthy first cases, less intergenerational social mingling – that Germany is in better shape than its European peers.

Better late than never: Germany’s key responses

Germany got off to a slow start in fighting the pandemic. When Bergamo was already suffering, Chancellor Merkel and Minister of Health Jens Spahn still kept telling people to wash their hands, not shake them. The federal health agency, in hindsight, sounded a lot like today’s deniers, claiming that there was a “very low risk of a pandemic” and comparing Covid-19 to a “severe flu wave”.

Moreover, shared competencies between the federal, Land and municipal level slowed the response to travellers arriving from the hotspots developing in Austrian and Italian ski resorts. Warnings by medical companies about imminent shortages of protective equipment due to increased demand from China went unheeded. Once cases began to multiply in North Rhine-Westphalia and Bavaria, local authorities were overwhelmed by the demand for tests and contact tracing.

It took until mid-March for the government to change gears – which it did decisively. In a televised speech on 18 March, Angela Merkel told the nation that “this is serious” – urging citizens to also “take it seriously”. Her speech proved to be a watershed, if only because this was the first time ever that the Chancellor had addressed the nation on television besides the traditional New Year’s Eve speech. The following weeks brought nationwide restrictions to social contacts (although social distancing rules vary between the Länder and have stopped far short of an actual

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lockdown) as well as a stimulus package worth more than one trillion euros. Without much hesitation, the government threw its cherished “black zero” balanced-budget rule overboard in response to the crisis.

It was not until then that the Federal Government also offered to support fellow European countries. Previously, Berlin – like most other EU members – had largely ignored Italy’s calls for help. It put a halt to at least one sale of protective gear to Switzerland and was quick to close its borders with Austria and France when infections there rose sharply. Germany’s assistance then came in the form of medical personnel and equipment sent to countries such as Italy, France, Spain and the UK. Meanwhile, Dutch, French and Italian patients were flown to German hospitals for treatment.

At the policy level, Germany was instrumental in devising the EU’s rescue package to the tune of 540 billion euros, including pandemic crisis support through the European Stability Mechanism. Moreover, Germany’s short-time work scheme, in which the state covers around two thirds of wages for employees on reduced hours, became the blueprint for a similar EU-funded scheme. And, crucially, Berlin, together with France, proposed a recovery fund worth half a trillion euros financed by EU-issued debt, thus making a leap towards shared liability (though stopping short of issuing “coronabonds” favoured by some member states).

Finally, Germany supports the European Commission’s efforts to coordinate a global response to the pandemic. The 7.4 billion euros pledged in response to the EU’s call for universal deployment of diagnostics, treatments and vaccines to tackle the pandemic in early May testifies to these efforts. Working also with like-minded countries in the Alliance for Multilateralism, Berlin wants the EU to fill the leadership vacuum left by the US.

What the crisis means for German and EU politics

Given Germany’s situation with an open leadership contest in the co-governing Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and a federal election coming up next year, the pandemic has begun to influence party politics. Ruling parties across the country have seen their poll numbers rise at the expense of those on the fringes. Approval for Chancellor Merkel, who was considered a lame duck after relinquishing the CDU chairmanship in late 2018 in order to deflect domestic critics, has risen considerably. At Land level, too, governors – often from the conservative camp, such as in North Rhine-Westphalia and Bavaria – are basking in increasing levels of support. The far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) and DIE LINKE, in contrast, have little to show in terms of crisis management. Centrist opposition parties – the liberals and the Greens – have also found it difficult to shine against the backdrop of an executive in seemingly successful crisis mode.

The pandemic has already had a direct impact on the country’s election calendar. The CDU party convention scheduled for late April to crown Angela Merkel’s would-be successor has been postponed to December. More importantly, the federal election is now unlikely to be brought forward from its September 2021 date, as was mooted not long ago in order to expedite the transition of power from a fourth-term chancellor. The leadership race itself is also being dominated by the pandemic. One contender is Armin Laschet, Minister-President of North Rhine-Westphalia (with the Federal Minister of Health as his running mate), while the other two have non-executive – and thus much less prominent – roles.

However, with widespread calamity failing to materialise in Germany, the broad-based initial support for confinement measures is slowly eroding. As the

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economic and social damage of the crisis response becomes apparent, some are questioning the proportionality of the measures, in particular as compared with other mortal threats such as cancer, road deaths and climate change. As in other countries, a debate has emerged about the cost of confinement in terms of freedoms curtailed and wealth destroyed. Right-wing groups appear ready to exploit the nascent popular protests in a similar manner as during the influx of refugees and migrants in 2015 and 2016.

Unfortunately, Germany lacks a vision for how to deal with the pandemic in the medium term. Or, as a lead article in the influential weekly *Der Spiegel* put it, after a flood has struck your home, you would not rebuild the house in the exact same way, with outdated features, for instance, but you would modernise it so that it can withstand the next disaster. Instead of holding a debate about the emergence of a new society, the country is arguing about the details of social distancing and disinfectants when opening up firms, schools and restaurants.

Similar pronouncements can be made about the EU, except that, here, Germany is about to take over the helm of the Council on 1 July. If the current Croatian Presidency is being defined by the immediate response to the pandemic, Berlin is preparing for a “corona presidency” in a bid to hold the EU together. The original programme focusing on the transition to a greener economy, boosting the digital transformation and strengthening the EU’s global role (including by redefining its relationships with the UK and China) has been upended. The focus now is on enabling an economic recovery and passing a seven-year budget, both with a sharp North-South split transpiring, as well as ending border closures. The objective is nothing less than “maintaining EU integration as such” (in the words of Germany’s Ambassador to the EU in a leaked cable to Berlin).

Europe needs courage and direction, not just crisis management

The trouble is that holding the club together when both internal and external factors are pulling it apart is difficult, if not impossible without giving it a sense of direction. The ongoing crisis has unmasked a number of the Union’s fundamental weaknesses – from its carbon-intensive economies to its incomplete eurozone architecture to a lack of internal supervision on rule of law issues – that cannot be papered over as in the past.

Going beyond the necessities of crisis management, Berlin should take the lead in helping member states to define a new “mission” for the EU to remain attractive. Addressing the German Bundestag, Chancellor Merkel already admitted two crucial points: the need for a political union to accompany the common currency, including to strengthen its global clout, and the possibility of treaty change. Add to this Germany’s initial presidency programme centred on the European Green Deal, the digital transformation and Europe’s global role, as well as the upcoming but postponed Conference on the Future of Europe, and the contours of a bold vision for a post-pandemic Union emerge: a green and digital Union based on cooperation and solidarity that would be an example for the world to follow.

The previous German EU presidency in 2007 saw the German Chancellor, who had been in office for only a little over a year, rescue the essence of the European Constitution by shepherding the Treaty of Lisbon. Now, Angela Merkel – the only European leader still around from that time – needs to show the way towards a reinvigorated and more dynamic EU. Bookending her tenure in Germany by concluding the European Convention procedure early on and now paving the way for a new, more comprehensive and inclusive constitutional process would ensure that she does not go down as “Madame Non” in European history books.

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