

# **Analyzing Germany's Approach to the Pandemic**

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I would like to review and offer some insights regarding Germany's performance with respect to the COVID-19 crisis.

First of all, based on the number of fatalities, we can say that Germany has been fairly effective and mobile in managing the crisis. Recent studies show that excess mortality in Germany is less than one percent above average while in the US, excess mortality is almost 20% above average. Germany was not sufficiently prepared for this unprecedented pandemic at the beginning, and lost at least a week before taking action. Most experts, including myself, thought that the pandemic was not as problematic as it appeared, because we thought that the virus would be less infectious than most other flu viruses, and less fatal than SARS and other recent epidemics. We also thought that risk managers would be able to contain the spread of the virus within China and surrounding countries. Over time, we corrected this notion and the central government acted swiftly within a short period of time.

## **One of the Countries with the Best Record**

In Germany, we have been testing as many people as possible to get accurate numbers, which I think is contributing to the containment of the disease, although mass testing alone does not explain the significant difference between Germany and countries like the United States or Italy. Testing in itself does not change anything in terms of risk management, but it gives us more certainty about how widespread the threat actually is. It is critical to know where and how the infection has spread in the population.

Like many other countries, we isolated the infected from the rest of the population to avoid stress on the healthcare system. We engaged in a fairly strict lockdown from the end of February, implementing what I call physical rather than social distancing measures. These measures were not as strict as they were in many East Asian countries. Families could visit parks for a walk; however, no more than two individuals were allowed to gather unless they were members of the same family. Travel was banned and many businesses were closed. Germany has gradually lifted its six weeks of strict regulations starting from mid-April, based on the condition that there were fewer than 50 infected people per 100,000 inhabitants. At present, the federal and regional governments agreed in July to allow tougher and more targeted lockdown measures to contain local outbreaks, following a cluster infection in a local community. In late August, the number of newly infected individuals was on the rise again but the threshold has not been reached to adopt more stringent measures (i.e. 50 infected per

100,000 people) throughout Germany. However, the threshold has been surpassed in some regions and more severe measures have been enacted locally.

As part of its strategy, the government planned to launch a centralized tracing app but there was a backlash due to concerns over privacy, reflecting the fact that Germans are fairly sensitive to civil rights issues and privacy, probably more so than the citizens of many other countries. The app that has now been developed and freely distributed is based on a decentralized tracking system by means of which individuals are warned if they have come close to infected persons. This information is not centrally stored or transmitted to public institutions. Furthermore, the use of the app is voluntary. At this point in time, a little more than a quarter of the German population has been reported to have activated the app.

## **Tensions between Central and Regional Governments**

Germany has a federal structure that divides authority between the central and regional governments. Despite the existence of tensions, the division of government roles seems to be effective overall, and allows for flexible approaches given the fact that different regions are affected differently.

The federal government is responsible for the overall strategy, but standards and restrictions are set by state-level governments. Furthermore, there are municipal-level governments that can modify these standards, and which are responsible for their implementation and oversight.

The state governments were very much in accord with the federal government in the beginning. As some states were more affected than others, it became difficult to set standards nationwide, which produced tensions among the federal, state and municipal levels due to their inability to align. Because there are different levels of risk in different regions, it makes sense to shy away from standardized regulations. States are now acting more independently in setting their own regulations.

It should be added that some state leaders saw this as an opportunity to achieve a better public profile, and maneuvered the crisis at the expense of strategical coherence, productivity and people's trust in the government. Many state and municipal leaders are pressing for the removal of all restrictions, although the majority of the public still supports strict measures.

## **The Role of Scientists and Specialists**

The German policymaking process is highly influenced by scientific advice.

What could be regarded as a specific characteristic in Germany is the nation's strong reliance on scientific institutions, in particular the Robert Koch Institute, which is the government's central scientific institution in the field of biomedicine and is responsible for safeguarding public health in Germany. It plays a major role in framing the debate and suggesting measures and rules. Scientists, specifically virologists and epidemiologists, also

have a significant role in policymaking as well as in the public debate about what should be done. The debate was strongly dominated by virologists and epidemiologists in the beginning, but this meant that economic ramifications, psychological consequences and social impacts were not always considered. This situation has been changing since May 2020 and other experts from the economic, social sciences and management fields have become more vocal in evaluating the adopted measures. To respond to frequent debates regarding whether the current regulations are proportional to the threat, as the principle of proportionality is very important in German law, the government has often consulted institutions like the National Academy of Sciences for advice. Science plays a major role and the government adheres to evidence-based policymaking.

The approval ratings of the federal government as well as state governments, including the main ruling party, the conservative Christian Democrat Union, have increased dramatically and are still at a high level. The Christian Democrat Union had lost public support over the past two and a half years, but now they would gain between 30 - 40% of the vote in an election. It is not unusual that ruling parties increase in popularity during a crisis, but in this case it has been apparent that Chancellor Merkel was given credit for being an excellent crisis manager. The strict measures applied were approved by the vast majority, despite a vocal and sometimes even violent protest movement led by so-called “Querdenker” (“mavericks”).

## **The Public’s Response to the Crisis**

The general public supported the government in the first phase of the crisis, but is gradually becoming more impatient and more polarized with the continuation of the regulations.

In the beginning in early January, there was considerable diversity of viewpoints, ranging from downplaying the risk to dramatizing the risk. However, that changed dramatically at the end of January and the beginning of February, as the general public reached a strong consensus in its support of the government’s decisions. The lockdown was welcomed by the vast majority (at least 70%) of the population.

Following this, public responses pluralized, and many are now questioning the validity of the current government strategy, with the continuation of strict social distancing rules but otherwise relaxed measures. We now face many local protests of up to 10,000 people who are opposed to the government rules and organize demonstrations in large cities such as Stuttgart and Berlin. People are becoming more familiar with the large numbers of cases and deaths, which I think is an interesting psychological phenomenon and signals a trend towards the re-calibration of normality. COVID-19 has become a familiar and almost expected concomitant of modern life.

People do understand that the top priority is to save lives, but once they get used to the crisis and see figures drop, they pressure the government to remove the restrictions.

Yet national opinion polls reveal that more than 70% of the public are still supporting

the central government's policies and are in favour of a cautious approach in removing the restrictions.

## **The Major Future Challenges**

Finally, I would like to address the major future challenges for Germany's recovery programme – whether it will move in the direction of sustainability, of redirecting funds into improved resilience, and how to compensate for inequitable consequences nationally and internationally.

Germany has announced an ambitious economic recovery programme. The planned programme has been exposed to many conflicting expectations, for example whether it should boost the economy regardless of purpose, or give it a specific direction such as green and sustainable economic development. Should the government merely hand Germans more money to boost consumption for a specific industry that is suffering severely, like the automobile industry? There has also been a huge debate involving the automobile industry, green NGOs and the general public, as to whether the government should only subsidize electric vehicles, should include vehicles using hydrogen or synthetic fuel, or should subsidize any type of car, and these have become sensitive issues. In the end the government decided to launch a recovery program that shows clear indications of directing economic growth towards sustainability, for example by subsidizing the purchase of electric cars but not of cars with conventional internal combustion engines.

With regard to investment in public health, the German health system was well prepared for emergencies, and most of those infected with COVID-19 were brought to hospitals at an early stage. Equipped with a large number of hospital beds, Germany's intensive care units (ICU) were far from being over-taxed, and in fact, we have made ICU beds available to patients from other EU countries. In the past, our health system was criticized for its overcapacity, because the investment of public funds brought up issues of efficiency versus resilience, but it now seems that the investment in resilience has paid off.

To reduce systemic risks like the pandemic, more investments are likely to be made in resilient public health structures including social support systems as well as critical technical infrastructure, for example for the nation's electric power system. Many hospitals in Germany are run privately but receive public funds. Under public supervision, the basic quality of rural and city hospitals does not differ significantly, but there is debate on how to provide hospitals with equal expertise to ensure equal access to treatment for this new virus. I must add that there were hospitals as well as elderly care homes that failed fairly badly in terms of limiting the disease, but these were fortunately exceptions to the rule. Investments towards resilient infrastructures may be accompanied by a re-nationalisation of critical supply chains. This could also become an issue between the right and the left of the political spectrum.

With regard to international relationships, it is expected that there will be strong pleas for solidarity with nations that are more affected than Germany, specifically the

southern states of Europe, i.e. Italy, Spain and in part France, but also from third world nations in Africa and South America. Italy was already in debt, and is asking the EU for support; the EU is also asking for solidarity. Germany has pledged to provide support to neighbouring countries through EU mechanisms. In a tough negotiation, the EU countries finally agreed to provide a substantial support fund for recovery based mostly on a regular EU budget and additional loans that need to be paid back over a long period of time. This EU policy is still controversial in Germany. Traditionally, there has been a major reluctance to utilize taxpayer funds for supporting other EU countries. Nevertheless, the new EU compromise has received overall approval from Germany's political parties, other than the right wing AfD, and the public at large. International concerns extend to the growing conflict between the US and China, as Germany is one of China's major trading partners.

We continue in our pursuit of a future vision and recovery.



### **Ortwin Renn**

Ortwin Renn is an internationally renowned risk researcher. As a scientific director at the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) in Potsdam, Germany, his research focuses on the role of systemic risks as threats to sustainable development, and structures for sustainable transformations in Germany and beyond. He continues to serve as acting chair of the Stuttgart Research Center for Interdisciplinary Risk and Innovation Studies at the University of Stuttgart (ZIRIUS) and as scientific director of DIALOGIK, a non-profit research institute for the investigation of communication and participation processes. He has a PhD in social psychology from the University of Cologne. His honors include the National Cross of Merit Order, an honorary doctorate from the Swiss Institute of Technology and the Distinguished Achievement Award of the Society for Risk Analysis (SRA).