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'We've got to rekindle passion for the European cause'

Great expectations rest on Germany's EU Presidency. Minister of State Michael Roth on an historic opportunity for Europe

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Germany assumes the European Council Presidency this week. The agenda was full before the coronavirus pandemic and now there are new pressing tasks. What can realistically be achieved in the next half-year?

> On the top of the agenda is of course dealing with the economic and social consequences of the pandemic. But it is precisely this severe crisis that has brought home the importance of priorities agreed months in advance: climate protection, strengthening social cohesion and the rule of law, expanding digitalisation and the urgent need for the European Union to speak with one voice in a world beset by crises.

You have repeatedly said that the expectations of Germany's council presidency are too high. Do we set ourselves up to be disappointed?

> We've got to be clear about what we are *not* going to do. We are not going to dominate the EU and rule single-handedly for six months. At this moment, our special virtues are needed: We have to mediate, build bridges and advocate for the interests of smaller states. But that shouldn't mean letting conflicts fester or keeping mum about pressing issues. I'm thinking in particular about the rule of law, as well as the state of fundamental values and democracy within the EU. We urgently need a clear, shared understanding of what it is that holds us together. It's not just the internal market and the single currency.

You've raised the issue of compliance with the rule of law. Should access to EU aid be linked to that?

Decades ago, the founders of united Europe could not have imagined that anyone in the EU would seriously question – indeed, violate – fundamental principles of the rule of law. But merely complaining won't help. We have to deal with it. *All* member states are required to follow the rule of law. We all have to put our own houses in order. We need a common agreement about the EU's core values. That's why, under the German presidency, we will begin an annual "Rule of Law Report" regarding all member states, based on a report by the Commission.

We definitely want EU funding to be more strongly linked to compliance with the rule of law. It's really very odd that the harshest critics of European solidarity benefit the most from the EU's coffers to finance a substantial part of their public investments.

It seems many Eastern European countries have the impression they've been forgotten during the Covid-19 pandemic. For the moment, the east-west debate has been displaced by a north-south focus because Italy and Spain have been the most severely affected. Is Eastern Europe no longer in the spotlight?

Pockets of poverty in the EU are dangerous for everyone – east, west, north and south. The EU's "Recovery Fund" is mostly for economically supporting the sectors and countries hit hardest by the pandemic. Additional funds will be made available to ensure roughly equivalent living conditions throughout the EU. We should maintain this ambitious goal. This does not mean, however, that the so-called "cohesion countries" are being punished because we're showing solidarity with the countries most affected by the pandemic.

At the beginning of the coronavirus crisis, the EU was on the sidelines. Each member state acted independently: Some countries closed borders unilaterally and hoarded protective equipment – thus tearing open old wounds. What can the German EU Presidency do to build trust?

No one had a master plan for dealing with this pandemic. The EU has very weak competencies with regard to health protection. Nevertheless, we managed to get our act together and act in solidarity regarding the cross-border treatment of people suffering from Covid-19 and the fair distribution of protective equipment. The Franco-German proposal – that on Germany's end is largely based on our social-democratic initiative – once again shows how important solidarity is to us.

You mentioned climate protection as a priority for the European

Council Presidency. How important can environmental issues be in light of the pressing economic and social problems?

Very! The coronavirus crisis is a kind of catalyst for increased climate protection. The EU is going to invest more money than ever before. The new funds have to be spent in a future-oriented, innovative and climate-friendly manner. We don't want to invest in yesterday's technologies, but rather in modern jobs and green technologies. We want to advance the necessary socio-ecological re-structuring of our economies through large-scale programmes and the new EU budget.

We have a great opportunity to make the EU *the* model for global climate-policy. We've got to show that even in crises, there's no need to cut corners, and that jobs and climate protection go hand in hand. We have to clarify how the fear campaigns of nationalists and populists are deceive people. This is our litmus test.

What about the EU's external relations? Given the mounting competition between China and the United States, what role is Europe playing?

With regard to external and security issues, the EU is still functioning far below its capabilities. We easily allow ourselves to feel threatened and become divided too quickly. We are not just competing with other global actors over economic policy: We are also competing with authoritarian regimes over the best model of governance. But this shouldn't make us relativise our values. Quite the contrary: We have to activate them. We must remain open to dialogue. Above all, we have to stick together. There's lots that needs to be improved.

But there's not enough cohesion. When it comes to China, the US and even our post-Brexit relationship to Great Britain, member states' very different interests come to the fore again and again. How can we find the unified position you call for?

National unilateralism has never been helpful. Not least with regard to our historical responsibility, we should always seek a common European approach and policy. I'm not just thinking about our transatlantic relations or those with China and India. I'm especially concerned about our relations with Russia. German policy that could harm EU member states is very dangerous. Too often we allow ourselves to be divided, while demagogic disinformation campaigns claim the EU isn't good for anything and doesn't *do* anything, either.

What can be done about that?

We've got to rekindle passion for the European cause. Sometimes

we're too technocratic and bureaucratic. At a time when nationalists and populists ignore facts and instead employ dark and negative emotions, create scapegoats, and paint everything black and white – generally decimating the EU and multilateralism – we must promote positivity.

Angela Merkel wanted to make relations with China a priority of the German EU Presidency. How should the EU position itself vis-à-vis this difficult partner?

Thus far, China has not shown any interest in having a closer relationship with the EU. China has sought to bilateralise its European relations in the "17 plus 1 Strategy" involving countries of Central and Eastern Europe. That approach is essentially based on trade and investment. In addition to these areas, however, we also need unity when dealing with China on climate protection and human rights policy issues. China is no easy partner, but it is *our* partner – and competitor, too.

The European model is a unique combination of peace, security, order and prosperity on one hand and democracy, respect for the rule of law and individual human rights on the other. In recent years, however, this promise has been broken. We had a serious socio-economic crisis with many jobless people, especially young people. Trust in the EU has been lost. We cannot rest on our laurels any longer. We have to fight – of course, in a civil fashion and with good arguments. But we also have to get emotional!

A "hard" Brexit is coming. This will be a big challenge for the German EU Presidency. What's its strategy for dealing with the entrenched positions?

First of all, I appeal to our British friends for less ideology and more pragmatism and realism. I can't understand the current negotiations in London. We agreed a political declaration and a detailed basis for negotiating months ago. Our offer remains the same. We want the closest relations possible with the United Kingdom. But if it wants to benefit from one of the world's largest single markets, it has to comply with the respective environmental, social and consumer protection standards. We also want to continue to closely cooperate with the UK on foreign and security policy. Amazingly enough, this is no longer under discussion.

One sticking point for the German EU Presidency will be medium-term financial planning. In February, no agreement was reached during the EU budget negotiations. How likely is a breakthrough?

We wanted to finish planning this almost a year ago. Combatting the coronavirus pandemic has again shown that the EU must become more effective and faster to respond. We need a much stronger European Union and that has to be backed by funding. But a budget is not just a series of columns of figures: It is politics represented by numbers. We want to do more to protect the climate and increase social cohesion, as well as to develop high-quality health-care systems throughout the European Union. We want to do more in the field of development assistance. We are committed to a humane, solidary and responsible migration policy. These are important milestones on the way to a future-oriented EU budget policy. Everyone knows this. Now we must approve the budget – quickly.

Has the coronavirus crisis increased the pressure so much that the prospects for an agreement have improved?

On one hand, yes. But let's not kid ourselves: It's about *much* more money. For some, that's a huge burden. We have to be able to justify the budget to the citizens.

Can you?

Yes, I can: Stability, economic, and social recovery and a functioning welfare state everywhere in the European Union safeguard jobs in Germany. We are exported-oriented. Over 60 per cent of our exports go to the European Union. We need a more *rational* understanding of solidarity. It's not a generous gesture made by the supposedly stronger towards the supposedly weaker. Solidarity is always good for everyone. When others do well, we also do well in Germany. This rational definition of solidarity can convince people who still think protecting others from themselves is a silly German obsession: nonsense!

At the end of the day, all European Union member states are in the same boat. I do, however, think that we have learned from the mistakes of the last financial and economic crisis – which led to a serious social crisis. With a few exceptions, I no longer feel the terrible arrogance that was related to austerity policy. The Chancellor and the CDU/CSU have come a long way. As a Social Democrat, I'm pleased about that.

The Merkel-Macron plan really represents a U-turn of the German government and the CDU/CSU. Joint liability is revolutionary. Is this change of heart only due to the current circumstances or will it last?

The plan is not a suggestion made personally by Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel. It is the official German-French proposal, which never would have been made without Social Democrats in

government in Berlin. It represents exactly what is in the coalition agreement, not any change of course. Social Democrats have long fought for the words in the coalition agreement to be followed by deeds. We have finally succeeded on this very sensitive and important point. Of course, I'm very pleased. The Chancellor claims ownership of it and has made it her personal cause. That makes her different from many others.

Isn't that unnerving? As you say, the plan has a Social Democratic imprint. But that's not generally known. Instead, Angela Merkel is getting the credit. Why can't Social Democrats be clearer about how helpful they've been in the crisis – and regarding the EU's future?

We must discuss this positively, with appreciation as well as self-confidence. We cannot just continue to find fault. We have to forge coalitions with other progressive European parties. We also have to be honest: Social Democrats have largely lost the emotional bond to our voters. Of course, successful policy alone won't do the trick. These days, passion and attractive executive leadership are more important than ever.

A chancellor who is always in the public eye definitely has it easier than a finance minister or other members of the Federal government and our Social Democratic leadership team. Sometimes we've given the impression that just realigning the party programme will solve our problems. It's more complicated than that. The entire package has to be right. Empathy is required here, too. We've got to emotionally reconnect those in society who are close to our hearts with the great, proud old party that's always viewed itself as a party of international solidarity and a united Europe.

This interview was conducted by Claudia Detsch.



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