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A new democratic impulse for Europe

Germany's EU presidency cannot be about tweaking the system. The EU needs a new model of socio-ecological development

Few European Union presidencies have been as momentous as the one Germany assumes on 1 July 2020. *This* presidency is anything but an institutional ritual: It is an historic opportunity.

After 10 years of crises – first financial and social, then migratory and environmental, and now health-related – both our development model and the European project are clearly exhausted and unable to effectively respond to our world's malfunctions. This state of perpetual crisis is fueling a profound *democratic* crisis stoked by illiberal democracies and marked by European citizens' declining engagement. We need a new cooperative project, a new democratic impulse and a new course for European politics. This is the threefold challenge of months to come. The challenge is collective. So we must unite in support of the German presidency and lay the foundations for a new paradigm for ecological and social policy.

When the French Left discusses the German presidency, it is speaking about a friendly country, Germany, and a sister party, the SPD. It's about what we think Germany should do and how German social democracy, which we know well, can help. We are not just presenting opinions here, but rather proposals to promote exchange and debate.

A crucial moment for the European Union

This presidency begins as the EU is undergoing phased deconfinement in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic that hit certain member states, including Italy, Spain and France, particularly hard. The EU's 'management' of this ordeal resembled a lousy rerun of its response to the financial crisis that severely tested Europe ten years ago.

The SPD in particular learned one important lesson from that crisis: that

the EU response to the financial crisis of 2008 undermined its foundations; already shaky, a similarly selfish liberal reaction to the Covid-19 crisis would destroy them. It was largely because of the SPD that Germany chose the path of cooperation and solidarity.

However, just because Germany is taking a new direction doesn't mean that all the other member states will follow its lead. This is why France must help Germany and European Socialists support the SPD. We need a strong social democracy to push back against conservatives and populist nationalists – in people's minds and at the polls.

We must seize the German presidency as the opportunity to reinvent French-German relations around the agreed definition of a successful new European project. This obviously begins with responding to the crisis. The French-German relationship cannot be self-centred: It must become a force that benefits all Europeans.

Faced with the shock and impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, we need more than solidarity: We need a wake-up call about our shared future. While Germany's strength and the prosperity of many EU member states do result from individual national efforts, the single market has been a major contributing factor. But that market will explode if we allow our countries to develop asymmetrically, with increasing gaps in unemployment figures and major disparities in living standards. If this happens, first Germany and then every other member state will be left to itself, battered by the winds of globalisation. That would be disastrous for Europeans, France and Germany – as well as for the Socialist family.

Therefore, the German presidency's first imperative is to develop a collective response to the crisis based on a common and unified vision. We must face up to the social emergencies in our countries and not allow millions of people to become impoverished. We have to create the basis for a new ecological and social development model. The 'recovery plan' proposed by Pedro Sanchez and supported by the French-German initiative is the basis for saving Europe and ensuring its future. Not merely a show of unity during a crisis, the plan is an act of faith which, by choosing to invest in the European idea, tells all Europeans their lives matter and are equally protected by the EU.

There's little time to get it right: History is accelerating. Germany is responsible for our collective success.

Europe needs a budget commensurate with its challenges. This is the crux of the recovery plan. If the EU can endow its budget with new resources, 'recovery' will not be synonymous with common debt.

Europe needs a new collective project to give new meaning to European democracy and restore citizens' confidence.

This is possible with the Green Deal, the convergence of living standards and development, social rights, the regeneration of public policy to ensure universal well-being, industrial renewal, food and digital sovereignty, economic rigour, promotion of the rule of law and freedoms and the fight against all types of discrimination. Social Democrats believe that these elements belong to one coherent global project, which could be described as 'well-being' grounded in sustainable development and individual and collective emancipation.

We propose that France and Germany jointly undertake four initiatives:

- To develop renewable energies, especially maritime energies, and turn them into sectors of European sovereignty.
- To prolong the European Battery Alliance and pool efforts in the Clean Hydrogen Alliance.
- To initiate an action plan to eradicate childhood poverty and generalise the Youth Guarantee for people below 25 years of age to be able to study, find training programmes and work.
- To ensure European sovereignty, particularly regarding health, data and digital networks.

Europeans can finally choose between suffering more crises or changing its model, and between regaining their autonomy or becoming valets of quasi-continental powers. The German EU presidency overlaps with the US elections. If Trump's isolationism persists, only the EU will be able to fill the void: it's a power of 450 million people. In the other camp, Russia and China are proving they are impressive competitors. We need a European geopolitical and strategic vision to guarantee our sovereignty, introduce a new approach to multilateralism and build a sphere of solidarity and co-development in the east, including with Russia, and in the south, with Africa and the Mediterranean basin.

The German EU presidency will have to launch the conference on the future of Europe. We want this to focus on defining a new collective European project and not vainly attempt fundamental transformation.

A presidency preparing a new programme for constructing Europe

There's little time to get it right: History *is* accelerating. Germany is responsible for our collective success.

Germany's EU presidency cannot just be about tweaking the system. Germany must oversee the mobilisation and transformation of Europe, its societies and economies so they regain collective momentum, become resilient to crises and autonomous in a more violent and brutal world. The EU must remain a benchmark, albeit imperfect, democratic space.

This transformation requires a commitment that transcends traditional partisan boundaries. This historic challenge will not erase political debate, however. There is no effective liberal response to our current concerns. Like France and Europe, Germany needs political change. With liberalism at a dead end, it is up to socialism and social democracy to reinvent themselves and help invigorate a new European left grounded in transnational citizenship and democracy. Socialist ideas must incorporate the finite nature of natural resources and the ecological imperative, while also remaining loyal to the project of individual and collective emancipation that is central to our identity.

Attempting to do so much in so little time might seem foolish. But this is an emergency. We must avoid the social explosion and fracturing of Europe, which would not only bring about *its* end but would also spell the end of each of our countries, at different speeds. Germany has an historic opportunity to shape the future. We stand as equals with it – as all EU countries should. Ahead of us awaits a human adventure that transcends parties and countries. This must be a time of fellowship, the moment for all Europeans to unite in support of something larger than themselves – in the name of our future.



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