EUROPEAN INTEGRATION 07.05.2020 | Linn Selle

Germany has a lot on its plate during the EU Council presidency

The German EU presidency will have to deal with the corona crisis, strengthen the EU budget and listen carefully to citizens

Read this article in German.

Germany will be taking over the presidency of the European Union in less than 60 days. Even a few months ago it looked as if climate neutrality, Brexit and the negotiations over the future EU budget framework were going to be the key topics of the German Council presidency. Now, the presidency's agenda will be dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic and its grave consequences for social cohesion, the economy and the idea of a borderless Europe. The Croatian government, which currently holds the presidency, was hit between the eyes by the impact of the pandemic. It had to give up its carefully planned presidency agenda in favour of crisis management.

The German federal government has more preparation time to bring the EU out of the crisis during its Council presidency with ideas and effective negotiation management. It has to take the opportunity to help shape the 'new start for Europe', which it set itself as a goal in the 2018 coalition agreement. The current crisis, which has pushed the European economies into economic and societal distress, requires decisive handling by Germany. The aspiration for a future-oriented EU policy has to be implemented in reality. The following subjects should be at the forefront of the Council presidency: First, coordinated efforts to overcome the crises, second, joint reconstruction with a strong EU budget and, third, the initiation of a dialogue about a future Europe that is resilient in the face of crises.

The last German EU presidency in 2007 was played out in calmer waters. The most important point on the agenda was agreement on a reform of the treaty after the failure of the constitutional treaty process. Thirteen years later and the circumstances at the outset of the Council presidency are different. The Covid-19 pandemic has not only revealed our

vulnerability to a virus. It has also again shone light on the fact that the EU is not sufficiently resilient to crises when the going gets tough. In March, we saw countries going it alone and uncoordinated restrictions at a time when the virus was spreading across Europe at high speed. Hitherto, strict border controls have been upsetting the operation of the EU's internal market. They put the achievements of a borderless Europe on hold.

The financial issues

In the meantime, the EU has found its way, step by step, back to coordination and solidarity. Patients are being flown out of overcrowded Italian and French hospitals into other EU countries and vital medical equipment is being distributed and jointly procured. The European Council came to an agreement on 23 April 2020 over aid and reconstruction measures and schedules for loosening the restrictions. The German government should use these schedules as guidelines for its presidency so that the loosening of prevention measures is carried out in a coordinated way and internal European borders can be opened again soon. Because then cross-border aid can flow, the security of supply in the EU's internal market can be restored and the fundamental freedoms for European citizens can be safeguarded.

Alongside overcoming the crisis, Germany's EU presidency is also facing a difficult task to moderate the discussions on financing the upcoming Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) of the EU and bringing these to a conclusion by the end of the year. The agreement of the European Council on a financially robust reconstruction fund is, in combination with the next MFF, an important cornerstone for European recovery. But there was already a considerable amount of time pressure in negotiations about the future financial priorities of the EU before the Covid-19 outbreak. Even a specially convened summit meeting in February was barely able to make progress on the EU's financial issues.

The past weeks have shown that the EU is not resilient to crises because its member states have put taking national action above European problem solving.

It makes complete sense that the financing of Europe's reconstruction should be anchored in the EU budget. Democratic control of the distribution of the funds can only be ensured by the European Parliament. But that increases the complexity of the MFF negotiations, which, in the face of the loss of the UK's contribution and new political requirements, were already challenging even before the coronavirus pandemic. Germany is facing the challenge of bringing about a quick agreement to raise the

future EU budget framework to far more than 1 per cent of the Gross National Income (GNI) of EU member states and to connect this to the political priorities. Considering the current crisis, the distribution of funds must, in addition, be made more flexible in the future seven year budget period and new sources of income must be identified for the EU budget.

The European Commission had already submitted many ideas, such as the European financial transaction tax or a European minimum tax, in its first MFF draft proposal. In the meantime, these also found favour with Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel. The Commission also announced a proposal to increase the own funds ceiling from 1.2 to 2 per cent of GNI to generate money for the reconstruction fund on the capital market with the additional resources. While the idea is welcome, it will be difficult to structure its implementation. This is because it is not only the Council that has to unanimously agree on increasing own funds but all national and individual regional parliaments must also each approve the decision by majority.

Dialogue with citizens

The past weeks have shown that the EU is not resilient to crises because its member states have put taking national action above European problem solving. Dealing with the collapse in solidarity and dialogue about Europe's future must therefore come back into political focus. The conference on the future of Europe promised by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen offers the possibility for countries to look beyond their own noses and to openly tackles issues which have been stagnating for years between governments – such as the issue of institutional reforms or of voting rights during the European elections. By the same token, future European priorities and the way there should be at the heart of discussions.

It is important that this dialogue is pursued jointly by Europeans and national politicians but also citizens. The European Parliament, the European Commission as well as numerous stakeholders within society have proposed their ideas for issues and for shaping an EU-wide dialogue. Only the Council's position on a future conference is still missing. Even if the conference cannot start as planned on Europe Day 2020 because of physical contact restrictions: the previous weeks have made it very clear that the debate on the future of Europe is, more than ever, necessary.

The two year process must therefore start after the end of the restrictions

on physical contact, in the winter of 2020-21 at the latest, if it is to present results by the time of the European elections in 2024. Regrettably, no word on the conference is mentioned in the first draft of the priorities of the German EU presidency. Here it would be important for the German government to change course and anchor a look into Europe's future in the presidency's programme. Europe cannot be rebuilt solely via new funds and aid packages. Broad dialogue close to the citizens is needed for a new start in a crisis-resilient Europe!



Linn Selle
Berlin

Linn Selle has been president of the "Europäische Bewegung Deutschland" since 2018.

-