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The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Germany's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Amrita Narlikar

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ABSTRACT

Germany's handling of the coronavirus pandemic has earned it almost all-round approval. This special report argues that there is indeed much that German policy has gotten right. But it is also important to keep an eye on the limitations and failings, for which Germany – and other countries that seek to emulate it – might end up paying a very dear price. In contrast, a timely correction of some aspects of German policy could help pre-empt both human and economic damage. The analysis offers some suggestions on what this remedial action could be.

CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

Western media has heaped endless praise on Germany's handling of the coronavirus pandemic. Sometimes with very good reason.

German politicians and policymakers can safely pat themselves on the back for at least three sets of achievements in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. On the human dimension, Germany's fatality rate has been low thus far; economically, its people have been better protected from the chaos that the virus is unleashing in many other countries; politically, its democratic institutions are still intact.

Observers across the world are marvelling at the relatively low fatality rate in the country. Compare the number of 8,027 deaths in Germany, to 27,650 in Spain, 31,763 in Italy, 34,466 in the United Kingdom, or 90,142 in the United States, and one can begin to see why many are so impressed. Take the fatalities in relation to the population size, and Germany's performance looks even stronger: deaths per million population in Germany come to 96, in comparison to 273 for the US, 508 for the UK, 525 for Italy, and 591 for Spain.¹ The main explanation for this "German exception"² lies in the country's medical preparedness. As early as mid-January, German virologists had developed a test for the virus;³ by February, German laboratories had built up the necessary stocks of test kits;⁴ the government committed early to testing and tracing; the country already had high ICU capacity in comparison to its European neighbours, which was further strengthened through new incentives.⁵

Necessary lockdown-type measures to limit the spread of the pandemic undoubtedly generate immediate economic costs for workers and families in all countries (to say nothing of the deep global recession that will follow after

the pandemic). The German government's policy response on this front was swift and generous. On 23 March, it announced a comprehensive economic package of 750 billion euros. This included subsidies for small companies and freelancers, stabilisation measures for large companies, and welfare measures for families.⁶ The package was laudable not only in terms of its content but also its signalling effect: the government understood the economic pain that its people would have to endure in the fight against the virus, and it was willing – as a high exception – to even go into debt to help. Since then, further such measures have been introduced and effectively implemented.

Additionally, German democracy is intact as are people's civil liberties. This government has wisely resisted the temptation to turn to surveillance mechanisms, which are increasingly becoming the norm in many parts of both the global north and the global south.⁷

All of the above are no mean achievements. But has Germany really gone far enough in what it could have done, and could still do, to avert the human cost and economic damage?

WHEN THE REPORT CARD SAYS, "COULD DO BETTER"

Germany never had a full-blown lockdown. It opted for a "contact ban" (meaning that gatherings of more than two people, except for families and households, were forbidden) and the closure of schools and non-essential shops. People were allowed to be outside as long as social distancing was observed. On 16 April, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced a significant loosening of even the limited restrictions. This loosening was the result of a difficult political compromise that was put in place despite the advice of leading medical experts. Melanie Brinkmann, a leading German virologist, had the following to say:

"The government has sent the wrong signal with the relaxation, and I am afraid that many people are now no longer taking the virus so seriously and are having more contact with other people again. If that happens, we will soon be back to where we started... From a virological point of view, there is no basis for easing the lockdown right now. Intelligent adaptation, yes, but all in all we cannot afford a resurgence of infection rates. After all, we still don't have any tools (vaccine or treatment) with which we can counter the virus if it picks up again."⁸

Brinkmann was not alone in expressing such a critique. In an interview with *The Guardian*, Christian Drosten, Germany's most prominent expert on

the coronavirus spoke of the “prevention paradox”:

“At the moment, we are seeing half-empty ICUs in Germany. This is because we started diagnostics early and on a broad scale, and we stopped the epidemic – that is, we brought the reproduction number^a below 1. Now, what I call the “prevention paradox” has set in. People are claiming we over-reacted, there is political and economic pressure to return to normal. The federal plan is to lift lockdown slightly, but because the German states, or Länder, set their own rules, I fear we’re going to see a lot of creativity in the interpretation of that plan. I worry that the reproduction number will start to climb again, and we will have a second wave.”⁹

The virologists may yet be proved right. As restaurants, shops, and schools open – admittedly with social distancing rules – it is not difficult to see that many people are beginning to believe that the crisis is over. Masks are worn in supermarkets and on public transport (as per the rules), but rarely outdoors on the (once again) busy streets. Diverse social and business groups demand further and faster reopening. And even the weak measures that remain in place have attracted anger and – especially ironically, in days of supposed social-distancing – motley crowds of protestors claiming to act in the name of democracy.¹⁰

It is commonplace to attribute what may have been a premature reopening to the pressures of federalism, along with an argument of “It’s the economy, stupid!”. But second, third... nth waves (until a vaccine is developed and distributed) will not help the economy, to say nothing of the loss of human life. Moreover, the argument of federalism begs the question why heads of some German states have been willing to jeopardise the hard-won gains of the country in the fight against the virus. The answer may lie in a simple issue, which could have been better handled: the political narrative on the pandemic.

Although the German government and medical personnel seem to have been well-prepared, the urgency of social-distancing, border closures, and lockdown-type of measures was visible neither in public debate nor in public behaviour.¹¹ On 18 March, Merkel addressed the nation in an unprecedented speech, which was enthusiastically received, nationally and internationally.

a The basic reproduction number, or R0, is a key measure of the spread of the virus, which indicates how many new cases one infected person generates.

The speech was balanced and empathetic; it highlighted the seriousness of the situation while also emphasising the possibility of agency by all people:

“Every individual counts. We are not condemned to accept the spread of this virus as an inevitable fact of life. We have the means to fight it.”¹²

But the speech also underlined, and re-underlined, that the elderly were the group particularly at risk:

“Ideally, we should avoid all contact with the elderly, because they are particularly at risk.”¹³

In this aspect, Merkel's narrative differed from that of another head of state – Jacinda Ardern – the Prime Minister of New Zealand, who was also commended for her effective handling of the crisis. Like Merkel, Ardern identified the threat as an extremely serious one, but she did not limit it to any sub-groups:

“If community transmission takes off in New Zealand the number of cases will double every five days. If that happens unchecked, our health system will be inundated, and tens of thousands of New Zealanders will die.”¹⁴

Ardern's language was empathetic, but also strong, and did not discriminate between groups based on their respective susceptibilities to the disease:

“The Government will do all it can to protect you. Now I'm asking you to do everything you can to protect us all. None of us can do this alone.

Your actions will be critical to our collective ability to stop the spread of COVID-19.

Failure to play your part in the coming days will put the lives of others at risk. There will be no tolerance for that and we will not hesitate in using enforcement powers if needed.”¹⁵

New Zealand went on to impose tough lockdown measures, and was successful in its collective efforts to stamp out the virus. As of 17 May, it had recorded four deaths per 1 million population.¹⁶

In contrast, the German leadership's focus on sub-groups of society as potential casualties of COVID-19 may have inadvertently contributed to some misperceptions amongst the public. For example, it is possible that people

may have taken away the message that the disease affects “only” the elderly and vulnerable (as if that were not bad enough); somehow then, self-restraint of any kind to prevent the spread of the disease became framed as an act of altruism, rather than self-interest. In the immediate aftermath of Merkel's address, even before the limited lockdown measures were put into place (and thus well before impatience and dissatisfaction with such measures could set in), there were signs that a significant proportion of the electorate did not see the virus as an urgent and collective threat.¹⁷

A narrative that the virus posed a real threat “only” to certain sub-groups is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the patience of the public to put up with even a few restrictions on their economic and social activities would have been low from the start, even with the most generous economic packages. Add to this the “prevention paradox”, plus the signal that the early loosening of the partial lockdown sends, and it is perhaps not surprising that a vocal minority is demanding an end to all restrictions. If people just do not believe that the virus could get as serious and encompassing in Germany as it has done elsewhere, one can reasonably expect that they would be disinclined to endure hardships to curtail it. The clamour for the full reopening of schools, childcare centres, offices, and more is hence unsurprising.

Second, a narrative that identifies sub-groups as being affected may turn out to be dangerous in the case of the novel coronavirus. Contra early reports, it has become increasingly evident – across countries – in the past weeks that COVID-19 is not a disease that spares the young and healthy. Its virulence has affected also patients who were believed to be in low-risk groups; those who survive it seem to be afflicted by its debilitating after-effects.¹⁸ In any case, not enough is yet known about the virus; narratives that patronise some groups and lull the rest of society into a premature sense of complacency could end up costing everyone even more dearly. For this reason, it might also be important to pay greater attention to infection rates within countries, rather than fixate on death rates alone. And in Germany, with 176,450 reported infections – admittedly also with commendably high rates of testing – this is not an insignificant number.¹⁹

THE DOWNRIGHT UGLY

While the previous two sections have examined the areas where Germany has done well and where it could potentially have done better, the pandemic has also brought out a deeply unsavoury side to German politics.

A stark example of this can be found in the remarks made by Boris Palmer, the mayor of Tübingen, who argued, “Let me say it quite brutally: In Germany, we are possibly saving people who will die in half a year anyway – because of their age and previous illnesses.” He then called for a swift re-opening of the economy, arguing that the “poverty shock” caused by the disruption to the global economy was killing millions of children. The politician’s remarks attracted a great deal of criticism from multiple sides, and he subsequently apologised, if he had expressed himself “in a misleading or brash way,” he was sorry.²⁰ The remarks nonetheless are significant for two reasons. First, this politician comes not from the extreme Right (as one might perhaps presume), but the Green party, suggesting that the boundaries of acceptable discourse have expanded dramatically. Second, arguments reminiscent of eugenics and social Darwinism have a particularly brutal ring to them in the context of German history.

Lower-level versions of this polarisation resonate across social media in Germany. For example, some voices claim that children are the real victims of the pandemic, although this is the one group that is the least threatened by the disease itself. The argument goes: Since children are unlikely to be fatally or critically affected by Covid-19, they should not have to “suffer” home-schooling, online classes, and restrictions in playtime activities. It is often ignored that this “sacrifice” could help save the lives of others.²¹ Some further voices state the obvious and point to the economic costs and the severity of the impending downturn, to then argue for a swift reopening.

If this were a poor country where the government was having to face a tough and immediate choice between life and livelihood, perhaps this debate could be just about understandable (though still not excusable). But this is not a poor country. The welfare state is strong here. In this context, the rush to return to normal life (especially by people in secure jobs with wonderful flexibilities of home office – in contrast for instance to the plight of migrant workers in India²²) sometimes reeks more of a choice between not life and livelihood, but life and lifestyle. This hurry may well prove to be counter-productive, as others too have suggested elsewhere.²³

BUILDING ON ITS SUCCESSES: NEXT STEPS

As this report has argued, the German government has much to be proud of. Public levels of trust in the government are high. A second wave of infections has not yet happened. There is much that could still be done. If it is done well, many lives will be saved, and economic recovery could be smoother. This

would be useful for Germany; given the size of its economy, this could have positive repercussions for Europe and the world as well.

So, what should the German government do? The answer is simple, albeit too frequently overlooked: a clear narrative needs to be developed, and one that takes into account all the new medical risks that this novel coronavirus poses and which have only become clearer in recent weeks. The narrative needs to be inclusive: it should not present the vulnerable as a burden to be borne by society at large; if recent data is correct, nobody is safe. It needs to encourage individuals to take greater responsibility – not only for altruistic reasons but because it is in their self-interest. Even if a second wave does not happen in the near future, this will help prepare German society to weather the hardships that it will likely have to face in the coming autumn and winter (when a new rise in infections is predicted). No amount of subsidies and welfare measures are likely to suffice in the absence of a convincing and sustainable narrative along such lines.²⁴ Without such a narrative in place, polarisation within German society will deepen, and prove potentially corrosive for democracy.²⁵

About the Author

Amrita Narlikar is the President of the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA), and Professor at Hamburg University. She also serves as Non-Resident Senior Fellow at ORF.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Data accessed on 17 May 2020 at <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>. Success, of course, depends on the measure of comparison. In Europe, Germany stands out as a high-performer. If one turns to Taiwan as an alternative reference point (with its population of 23 million, 440 cases, and 7 deaths), Germany looks like an under-achiever. On Taiwan, see Saira Asher, 'Coronavirus: Why Taiwan won't have a seat at the virus talks,' <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-52661181>, 17 May 2020.
- 2 Katrin Bennhold, 'A German Exception? Why the Country's coronavirus death rate is low,' *New York Times*, 4 April 2020 (updated 6 May 2020).
- 3 'Researchers develop first diagnostic test for novel coronavirus in China,' *Joint Press Release*, Charité and DZIF, Berlin, January 2016. https://www.charite.de/en/service/press_reports/artikel/detail/researchers_develop_first_diagnostic_test_for_novel_coronavirus_in_china/. This early response was all the more commendable and prescient in the context of the belated advice that was being dished out by the WHO; see Samir Saran, 'Dr WHO gets prescription wrong,' 25 March, ORF, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/covid19-dr-who-gets-prescription-wrong-63708/>.
- 4 Bennhold, 2020.
- 5 Guy Chazan, 'Oversupply of hospital beds helps Germany to fight virus,' *Financial Times*, 13 April 2020.
- 6 'German Cabinet Agrees to 750 Billion Euros in Emergency Aid Measures,' *Spiegel International*, 23 March 2020, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/german-cabinet-agrees-to-750-billion-euros-in-emergency-aid-measures-a-9905ff76-c22d-4a9e-a3d4-c44633daf94e>.
- 7 Natasha Singer and Choe Sang-Hun, 'As Coronavirus Surveillance Escalates, Personal Privacy Plummet,' *New York Times*, 23 May 2020.
- 8 'The German Government has sent the wrong signal by relaxing the coronavirus lockdown,' <https://www.thelocal.de/20200423/the-german-government-has-sent-the-wrong-signal-by-relaxing-coronavirus-lockdown-says-top-virologist>, 23 April 2020.
- 9 Interview with Christian Drosten, 'For many, I'm the evil guy crippling the economy,' *Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/26/virologist-christian-drosten-germany-coronavirus-expert-interview>, 26 April 2020.
- 10 Felix Bohr et al, 'Berlin fears populists will exploit protest movements,' *Spiegel Online*, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/berlin-fears-populists-will-exploit-protest-movement-a-3a4702b8-6701-401d-b712-6d3e19453a56>, 15 May 2020.
- 11 Amrita Narlikar, 'The Coronavirus and Germany,' *Global Policy Blog*, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/13/03/2020/coronavirus-and->

- germany, 13 March 2020.
- 12 'Address to the Nation by Federal Chancellor,' *Speech by Angela Merkel*, <https://www.bundestkanzlerin.de/bkin-en/news/statement-chancellor-1732302>, 19 March 2020 (official English Translation).
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 'Prime Minister: COVID19 Alert Level Increased,' *Speech by Jacinda Ardern*, <https://www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/prime-minister-covid-19-alert-level-increased>, 23 March 2020.
 - 15 Ibid.
 - 16 In contrast to Germany's 96 recorded COVID-19 deaths per million population.
 - 17 E.g. Markus Buhl, Interview with Amelie Ebener, 'Wie es sich anfühlt, zur Corona-Risikogruppe zu gehören,' *Der Tagesspiegel*, 19 March 2020.
 - 18 E.g. Mara Gay, "I wish I could do something for you," my doctor said,' *New York Times*, 14 May 2020; Dirk Draulans, Interview with Peter Piot, "Finally a virus got me": Scientist who fought Ebola and HIV reflects on facing death from COVID19,' *Science*, 8 May 2020; Ariana Eunjung Cha, 'Young and middle-aged people, barely sick with covid-19, are dying of strokes,' *Washington Post*, 25 April 2020.
 - 19 This number of reported infections is comparable to France (179,365 infections), but much better than the US (over 1.5 million), Spain (277,719), UK (240,161), or Italy (224,760). This difference reinforces the point made in Section 1 on Germany's successes, and also offers Germany scope for remedial and strong action before infections start rising again.
 - 20 "Wir retten möglicherweise Menschen, die in einem halben Jahr sowieso tot wären," *Der Tagesspiegel*, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/boris-palmer-provoziert-in-coronavirus-krise-wir-retten-moeglicherweise-menschen-die-in-einem-halben-jahr-sowieso-tot-waeren/25782926.html>, 28 April 2020.
 - 21 This is not to belittle the actual difficulties that come with even partial lockdown measure. Some are indeed very serious, such as domestic violence and abuse. The answer to this though is not a reopening of offices and bars during a pandemic, but finding direct and sustainable solutions to these problems (and not only in times of crisis).
 - 22 E.g., Aditi Ratho and Soumya Bhowmick, 'East to West: India's migrant crisis looms large during COVID-19,' <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/east-west-india-migrant-crisis-looms-large-during-covid19-64880/>, 20 April 2020.
 - 23 E.g. "Leaders must recognize that what's good for public health is also good for business," see Rajeev Cherukupalli and Tom Frieden, 'Only Saving Lives will Save Livelihoods: The right way to understand pandemic economics,'

Foreign Affairs, 13 May 2020.

- 24 On how to build winning and sustainable narratives, see Amrita Narlikar, *Poverty Narratives and Power Paradoxes in International Trade Negotiations and Beyond*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.
- 25 E.g.: If the government is unable to convince the electorate in the future that restrictions might be essential (thanks to the prevention paradox), more direct enforcement measures may become necessary, at the detriment to civil liberties.



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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005.
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org