

#BerlinPerspectives

Analysing German European Policy

Germany's EU Council Presidency 2020

Achieving more than managing expectations in challenging times

by Katrin Böttger and Funda Tekin

- *Germany takes over the EU council presidency in challenging times*
- *Expectations for Germany's EU Council Presidency are high*
- *In order to bring the integration project forward, Germany should strive to go beyond managing expectations*
- *The German presidency should prioritize the most pressing issues including the MFF and Brexit*
- *At the same time, it should lead the conversation on crosscutting issues affecting the EU's core values*

Between 1 July and 31 December 2020, Germany will hold the presidency of the Council of the EU for the first time since the first half of 2007. This comes at a time when there are many major and urgent issues on the EU's agenda. The United Kingdom exited the EU on 31 January 2020 and negotiations on post-Brexit relations are due to be completed by the time the transition period expires at the end of December 2020. The new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), which is still being negotiated, is due to start on 1 January 2021. Additionally, migration policy is under revision, and issues such as the European Green Deal, digitalisation, and the EU's role in the global order have to be dealt with. Germany's presidency also comes as the Brussels institutions have hit their stride after the changes in their leadership in the wake of the 2019 European Parliament elections.

As the largest member state of the EU, and arguably a reluctant hegemon within it, Germany is perceived by other members as being well placed to lead the negotiations and build consensus on the issues listed above.

Expectations throughout Europe for the German presidency to deliver were already high when, to make

the situation more challenging, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted all plans and agendas for the remainder of the year. This challenges the German presidency in two significant ways. First, with regard to logistics, since most of the negotiations and meetings will have to be held virtually. Second, in terms of content and the structure of the presidency, the pandemic and its consequences demand a comprehensive recovery programme, on which member states are divided.

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The question facing the German presidency is how to avoid being overwhelmed by the multitude of tasks it is confronted with at such a time of insecurity. It will have to come down to prioritising certain issues while at the same time re-opening the debate surrounding the future of Europe.

Managing expectations

Initially, Germany's general approach was to prepare and implement a decentralised presidency – in terms of content by involving all ministries and in terms of structure by holding events, especially informal council meetings, in large- and medium-sized cities across the country. Early on, the Federal Foreign Office was reluctant to divulge details of its programme, because it did not want to take the limelight away from the preceding Croatian presidency, and because it expected the programme to be largely shaped as needs arose during these six months. One of the few elements that were communicated rather early was the holding of an EU-China summit, which was due to be held in Leipzig in September 2020 but has now been postponed.

Overall, especially looking back at Germany's successful and consequential 2007 presidency, there were strong hopes within the country and beyond, that this time around it would be able to cut the Gordian knot on the multitude of issues that are at an impasse, such as migration and on the MFF. The hope in Berlin in 2019 that the MFF negotiations would have been concluded by the time Germany took over the presidency has turned out to be wishful thinking.

Challenging times

With the Covid-19 pandemic developing and influencing all policymaking, German officials soon realised that their assumption that the presidency's programme would be shaped as needs arose has turned out to be more accurate than they could have known. The multifaceted challenge of the Covid-19 crisis has added challenges for the German presidency: health issues, social effects, economic recession, initial responses that lacked solidarity, uncoordinated actions by member states that put Schengen and the internal market at risk, and the need to hold many, if not all, meetings virtually, which the Council infrastructure is ill-equipped for.

The German government started to adapt to the situation step-by-step, first, by acknowledging the general need for reworking its programme. Second, by rethinking its position on the MFF, which was initially based on a limit of 1% GNI of the EU-27. And, third, by realising that, due to the focus on short-term emergency action during the first half of 2020, all large dossiers, including the Brexit negotiations, would fall squarely within the German presidency which, in turn, reduces the time available to address any non-mandatory issues.

The priorities of the German government, were therefore realigned with the amended European Commission's working programme for 2020 by also postponing some topics to the agenda for 2021. But, even after this effort at prioritisation, the list of topics to be tackled this year remains extensive. It includes pressing issues such as aligning the recovery plan with the green deal (green recovery), strengthening the youth dimension, digital and technological sovereignty, a functioning internal market, the Common European Asylum System,

preservation of the rule of law based on the annual review by the European Commission, stabilising the fragile neighbourhood, and the Common Security and Defence Policy. It fails to mention the conference on the future of Europe, something German officials have justified by highlighting that the list contained topics rather than formats.

Options for framing the presidency

It is important to keep in mind the fact that, beside Germany's presidency of the Council of the EU, other EU institutional actors will also be playing a decisive role in the next six months, therefore, Germany's scope of action might be limited or will at least need to be streamlined with the European Commission's work programme, the strategic Agenda of the European Council and the programme of the Trio Presidency that Germany shares with Portugal and Slovenia. Yet, the German government has three main options, building on a Council presidency's functions of administrator, agenda manager, honest broker and representative figure.

The first option is for Germany to calibrate its programme carefully based on a needs assessment. This means that some issues can be shifted onto the agenda of the following presidencies to the benefit of more pressing ones that cannot wait. It can also postpone issues it does not want to, or are too difficult to, tackle during the presidency proceedings.

The second option is to muddle through by taking action wherever and whenever needed. In doing so, Germany might be able to broker hard-won solutions on selected issues. However, this also risks doing things only half-heartedly – for example, a virtual Conference on the Future of Europe – which would lead to unsatisfactory results.

A third option for Germany would be to attempt a bold qualitative leap forward, which the EU desperately needs. This requires engaging in structured debates on visions for the EU that set the frame for making the EU more resilient in a targeted manner. In this, Germany can draw from its 2007 presidency, during which it

successfully laid the groundwork for the Lisbon Treaty.

The way to go

Undoubtedly, Germany is taking over the presidency of the Council of the EU in difficult times. Nonetheless, it should not forgo the opportunity its term presents to leave a mark on European integration – just as it was able to do in 2007. The Covid-19 pandemic requires urgent recovery measures.

It also challenges Germany to set up more than a mere 'Corona presidency', because the pandemic has highlighted and reinforced structural deficits emerging in the EU, such as the undermining of the rule of law in several member states, national backlashes evident in rising Eurosceptic populism or socio-economic divisions within member states. Getting the EU back on track requires more than a piecemeal approach. Therefore, the German presidency should follow a two-pronged, calibrated approach balancing the most urgent issues and the fundamental questions, and avoiding muddling through.

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During the German presidency, the EU will have to deliver on the Covid-19 recovery plan, the MFF and Brexit, and make substantial progress on digitalization and climate change, if the EU does not want to miss the targets of the European Commission as well as find a way forward for reforming the Common European Asylum System. Beyond that, it is essential that Germany's presidency does not shy away from fundamental issues affecting the EU's core values. This must include questions such as how the EU wants to safeguard its values internally, and what role it wants to play for its citizens and as a foreign policy actor. The answers to these questions should

guide the EU internally in protecting the Schengen area and the internal market as well as finalising the economic and fiscal union. They should also guide the EU in its external action, a dimension where it faces worrisome developments not only with regard to China but also to the United States and Turkey.

Therefore, only by daring to extend the scope of its presidency beyond striving for short-term policy solutions by enabling crosscutting conversations about the future can Germany set the direction for the European integration project for years to come.

This #BerlinPerspectives reflects the author's views only.

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