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Making Europe Strong Again in its entirety. The German EU Council Presidency 2020 and its implications for North Macedonia

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Impressum

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Introduction

For the second half of the year 2020, starting on July 1st, Germany will hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU. This is member states' greatest chance to set the EU agenda for six months and even more so for Germany, a strong player in EU affairs. Germany picks up this role from Croatia and will then be followed by Portugal and Slovenia in 2021 and France and Czech Republic in 2022, overall favourable, strongly pro-European consecutive Presidency trios. After an underperforming Croatian Presidency, overwhelmed with the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, big hopes are set in the transformative power of the German Presidency, leading up the "Conference on the Future of Europe" under the French Presidency. That said, both in France and in Germany elections are coming up during, or close after, the respective Presidency.

Germany assumes its "Corona Presidency" in times of European crisis, but equally at a time of European opportunity. These circumstances had initially required the German government to shift priorities of their Presidency. The Corona crisis has profoundly shaken European economies, putting questions of economic and social convergence within the EU high up on the agenda and giving way for a renewed discussion on the EU's fiscal (and consequently political) future. Germany presents itself determined to seize the opportunity for European integration, organizing their Presidency under the theme **"Together. Making Europe Strong Again."**

Other than the motto suggests, Germans seek no inspiration from Trump's US, instead emphasizing the importance of multilateralism and future-oriented

responses to global challenges such as climate change. "Solidarity", declared Angela Merkel in a speech in May 2020, "will be the guiding principle of the German Council Presidency."¹ Starting at home, Merkel presents herself determined to not let authoritarian powers, populists and radicals abuse the current economic crisis for their political agenda, and to instead use the Presidency to recapture the debate on the future of the EU from the EU's enemies. Europe's friends would instead need to be its constructive critics and ambitious shapers.

The Covid-19 crisis has unveiled flaws in the institutional design and what seems to be a lack of political competence at side of the EU. Leading up to the beforementioned Conference on the Future of Europe in 2022, the German Presidency and crisis response models will ultimately be accommodated by discussions on European integration

and, potentially, by a renewed constitutional debate – potentially a déjà-vu to Germany's last Presidency in 2007, just months after the failure of the last EU constitutional debate.

This paper will outline the priorities of the German Presidency in the context of the broader rotation of Presidency trios. Particular focus will be given to EU foreign policy priorities, forging the link to EU enlargement policy and the idea of European unification where important events are ought to happen – including the presentation of the accession negotiation framework and the enlargement package for North Macedonia (and Albania).

¹ Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation Germany (May 2020). Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel über die Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik in der deutschen EU-Ratspräsidentschaft. Webinar. <https://www.kas.de/de/veranstaltungsberichte/detail/-/content/europa-als-solidarische-handlungsfaeheige-und-gestaltende-kraft-weiterentwickeln>

Priorities of the German Presidency

Coming up to German parliamentary elections in 2021, 2019 and the first months of 2020 had been a busy year for the Grand Coalition of Christian-Democrats (CDU) and Social-Democrats (SPD) in Germany. The government parties had been split over personnel questions and occupied with itself. In spite of this, under strong governmental leadership based on a cautious, sober and science-reliant approach, Germany managed to fight the crisis and prevented the worst predictions, both in regards to public health and the (private) economy.

After initial criticism due to a perceived lack of (German) solidarity with especially hard-hit countries in Europe's South, the German government has drastically

changed its rather cautious approach to more European integration. Just as Germany is taking its turn in the Council's Presidency, Angela Merkel accounts for a swift U-Turn on the German commitment to European financial burden sharing, having drafted a (financially) ambitious rescue plan together with Macron².

After a few frosty months, the Franko-German motor seems to be running again, full speed towards a more political, more competent and more sovereign European Union. Within Germany, the dry spell of the CDU is forgotten, the in-fighting side-lined as the party excels in polls³. In response to the Covid-19 crisis, the Grand Coalition managed to present a massive, well-received economic stimulus package in June excluding, e.g., a controversially discussed stimulus mechanism to boost the car industry in a bid for a sustainable way forward⁴. Germany thus takes on the Presidency in a time of – considering the social and economic circumstances

² Presse- und Informationsamt der Bundesregierung Deutschland (18. Mai 2020): A French-German Initiative for the Recovery from the Coronavirus Crisis. Pressemitteilung 173/20. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/resource/blob/973812/1753772/414a4b5a1ca91d4f7146eeb2b39ee72b/2020-05-18-deutsch-franzoesischer-erklaerung-eng-data.pdf?download=1>

³ Florian Gathmann (April 2020): CDU in Zeiten von Corona: Plötzlich Populär. Spiegel Online. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/cdu-in-der-corona-krise-ploetzlich-populaer-a-b48d2cc8-32db-44b2-b58e-e3ef8e7358b8>

⁴ Bundesregierung (Juni 2020): Konjunkturpaket: Milliardenhilfen beschlossen. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/themen/coronavirus/konjunkturpaket-geschnuert-1757558>

– stability and political harmony at home, possibly allowing for a more engaged approach to EU affairs. This impression is endorsed by a supportive and homogenous attitude in the German *Bundestag* in regards to Angela Merkel's Presidency plans which were presented and discussed on June 18th⁵.

Looking at the European Union, following weeks of opposing priorities and dissent Germany takes over at a fairly united and forward-looking moment. For obvious reasons, the main task during the German Presidency will be the European response to the consequences of the Covid-19 Crisis. To some extent this means that Germany has had to compromise on certain priorities drafted before the Corona chaos, mostly, however, it allows a chance to seize the momentum and lay out the grounds for more Europeanization and potentially even a serious reconsideration of a

European constitutional debate, to be followed by the coming presidencies.

Crisis management during the German Presidency will entail two aspects. It obviously comprises the development of **concrete recovery plans aiming at immediate financial relief**. This debate will likely be intertwined with the ongoing EU long-term budget debate, a challenging task even before the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis⁶. In their Corona-crisis action plan⁷, the Commission already presented resourceful instruments to finance the recovery of states and decrease the EU's vulnerability to future economic shocks. Essentially, the **"Next Generation EU"** plan includes the (temporary) elevation of the EU's own resources ceiling from 1% to 2% of the EU Gross National Income,⁸ allowing the Commission to use its strong credit rating to borrow €750 billion on the financial markets.⁸.

⁵ Deutscher Bundestag (18. Juni 2020). Regierungserklärung zur Ratspräsidentschaft und zum Europäischen Rat. <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2020/kw25-de-regierungserklaerung-700600>

⁶ <https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/european-union/article/show/germany-has-a-lot-on-its-plate-during-the-eu-council-Presidency-4336/>

⁷ European Commission (27. May 2020): The EU Budget Powering: The Recovery Plan For Europe – Factsheet. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/factsheet_1_en.pdf

⁸ European Commission (27. May 2020): Financing the Recovery Plan – Factsheet. https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/factsheet_3_04.06.pdf

On the other hand, the development of a **European Health Union** and a **relocation of critical health industry** are key components of a Covid-19 recovery plan for Europe, demanding long-term strategies and cooperation between resorts.

Despite the overarching crisis, the German Presidency will not be freed of daily politics, including the before-mentioned **Multannual Financial Framework (MFF)** which is expected to be finalized in Autumn 2020 as well as the (hopefully) final negotiation of a **post-Brexit agreement**, scheduled to be concluded by the end of 2020 and including the drafting of a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement.

Despite the sheer work expected with EU internal affairs, the EU Presidency has traditionally been an opportunity for member states to highlight priorities in EU foreign and security policy.

One often-emphasized priority during the German Presidency are the **external relations with China**, increasingly a strategic competitor, yet one important to partner with. An EU-China Summit in September 2020 in Leipzig, Germany was planned to pitch the grounds of the mutual relations and, among other things, to forward talks on the EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment. In early June, the summit has been cancelled (and not yet re-scheduled) due to Covid-19. The cancelled summit prompts questions on the worsened relations between China and the EU who were ambiguous already before the Corona-crisis. For weeks now, calls to limit the Chinese scope of influence in Europe have gained volume and the most recent development in Hong Kong once again showcases the diverging values and practices of European and Chinese governments⁹.

While Covid-19 has definitely been a kill-joy in many ways, it does not stand in the way

⁹ Walker, Richard (04. June 2020). EU-China Summit: What Really Happened? Deutsche Welle Online. <https://www.dw.com/en/eu-china-summit-what-really-happened/a-53688837>

of the EU-Africa Summit planned between European and African leaders in Brussels this coming October¹⁰. In her speech to the German *Bundestag* Angela Merkel emphasized the relevance of **strong partnership with African countries** where EU unanimity would be a necessary precondition to a strategic role¹¹. For Germany, foreign policy priorities are tied to the belief that solidarity must be based on EU values. Returning to the topic of Corona-crisis relief, politicians have emphasized that this solidarity must expand beyond EU borders, showing **international responsibility** by offering aid to especially hard-hit partners. In before-mentioned speech, German Chancellor Angela Merkel called for Europe to be a **reliable partner in the world, a stability anchor and a creator of peace and security in the world**¹². The support mechanisms for the Western

Balkans¹³, decided recently, show that the region is considered a valuable partner to the EU which can expect more support during the German Presidency. At the same time, seeing Ambassador Richard Grenell, US President Donald J. Trump's special envoy for peace negotiations between Serbia and Kosovo, pushing hard and decisively towards a resolution of the decade long disputed between the two countries (just weeks after he resigned from his position as ambassador to Germany) will demand situational awareness paired with assertiveness at the side of the EU. Unlike anticipated in the US, success does not come as easily as hoped. This could again be seen most recently when peace talks between political leaders from Kosovo and Serbia scheduled for 27th of June in the White House¹⁴ were cancelled last minute.

¹⁰ European Commission (9. March 2020): EU paves the Way for a stronger, more ambitious partnership with Africa. Press Release. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_373

¹¹ Deutscher Bundestag (18. Juni 2020). Regierungserklärung zur Ratspräsidentschaft und zum Europäischen Rat. <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2020/kw25-de-regierungserklaerung-700600>

¹² Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation Germany (May 2020). Bundeskanzlerin Angela Merkel über die Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik in der deutschen EU-Ratspräsidentschaft. Webinar. <https://www.kas.de/de/veranstaltungsberichte/detail/-/content/europa-als-solidarische-handlungsfahige-und-gestaltende-kraft-weiterentwickeln>

¹³ See an EU Council infographic on the EU recovery package here: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/de/infographics/economic-support-to-western-balkans/>

Last, but not least, the German Presidency has committed itself to further pursuing **EU flagship goals such as the European Green Deal, an industrial strategy for social and economic cohesion, digitalization and the democratization (namely through the inclusion of and accountability to citizens) of EU processes.** If done correctly, all these aspects will echo in the plans forward. Both the Covid-19 recovery for the “Next Generation EU”¹⁵ and the MFF should signal that financial resources are tied to sustainable, lawful and futuristic structures¹⁶, even if this will potentially complicate the discussion among member states. Coming forward with the Franko-German European Recovery Fund, implicitly raising questions for the development of new fiscal instruments and an expansion of EU competence, signals strong European commitment in

Berlin¹⁷. This becomes particularly relevant considering that the German Presidency will be leading up, through a group of very pro-European countries picking up the relay, towards the French Presidency and the Conference on the Future of Europe in 2022. After all, six months are a short period to bring about big change. Burdened with crisis response, it will be one key task of the German Presidency to lay out the foundations for comprehensive reform followed-up on by their successors.

¹⁴ https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-to-host-balkan-peace-talks-11592241165?fbclid=IwAR0I2oJY65K6wSDBUQglug-0L82sc_LwVAuigvEo-ZozG9ehCARWsPaNAqQ

¹⁵ Information on the European Commission's recovery plan for Europe can be found here: https://ec.europa.eu/info/live-work-travel-eu/health/coronavirus-response/recovery-plan-europe_en

¹⁶ Nachhaltigkeitsrat (June 2020) highlights especially the chances of the EU Green Agenda in connection to the EU recovery programme in the commentary *EU-Ratspräsidentschaft: Das halbe Jahr der ganzen Entscheidung*. <https://www.nachhaltigkeitsrat.de/aktuelles/eu-ratspraesidentschaft-das-halbe-jahr-der-ganzen-entscheidung/>

¹⁷ Schwarzer, D. & Vallée, S. (May 2020). Pushing the EU to a Hamiltonian Moment. Germany's Court Ruling and the Need to Build a Fiscal Capacity Force a Constitutional Debate. DGAP Policy Brief No. 10. <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/pushing-eu-hamiltonian-moment>

Working towards EU unification (and continental integrity) during the German Presidency

On July 1st, Germany is taking over the EU Presidency from Croatia. When Croatia had introduced their theme of “a strong Europe in a world of challenges” they could not have possibly imagined the biggest challenge ahead, kicking in just midway through their Presidency. Today, their priorities appear almost ironic against the backdrop of the Covid-19 crisis¹⁸. A Europe that develops? Not quite during the biggest recession since the 1930s Great Recession. A Europe that connects? Instead a Europe that reintroduces border controls and border closures as consequence to the raging virus. A Europe that protects? Or rather: a Europe that falls short on medicine and medical equipment due to health dependency on China. An influential Europe? Quite the opposite: A

Europe so occupied with re-nationalisation that strategic and global politics become insignificant. It certainly is not quite fair to measure the Croatian performance only based on the European initial paralysis caused by the Covid19-crisis. Yet, the underperformance is not all to blame on Covid-19.

One way or the other, one must grant the leadership in Zagreb that they succeeded in pushing the Council towards the decision¹⁹ to open accession negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania. Furthermore, they also went ahead with their planned Western Balkans Summit in May 2020, organizing a virtual as opposed to a physical meeting, at the height of the Covid-19 uncertainty in Europe. The Western Balkans and their integration into the structures of the European Union had been a declared priority of the Croatian Presidency.

But, with so much on their table, why should the German Presidency dedicate importance to the Western Balkans, and, more specifically, to North Macedonia

¹⁸ The priorities and programme of the Croatian Presidency can be found online at <https://eu2020.hr/Home/Custom?code=Priorities>

¹⁹ The Council conclusions on the EU's enlargement policy and the EU-Western Balkans stabilisation and association process - Albania and the Republic of North Macedonia <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/03/25/council-conclusions-on-enlargement-and-stabilisation-and-association-process/>

(and Albania), during such crucial time for the future of Europe? The reunification of Germany was important to end the Cold War in Europe, and to kick-start the creation of the European Union with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. Equally, the unification (and continental integrity) of the EU by including Western Balkan countries in the European family is important for a stronger, geopolitically and geostrategically vigilant EU, and as such can pave the way for European sovereignty.

If the German Presidency wishes to substantiate their policy priorities lastingly, they would be well-advised to consider the Western Balkans not only in the foreign aid and EU enlargement portfolio, but also implicit and explicitly in EU (internal) crisis response and convergence programmes. And this approach should be broadened even further, and not only limit to the response of the current Covid-19 crisis, but beyond, to all EU policies and actions, from environment to civilian and military missions as part of its Common Security

and Defence Policy. Because this agenda is crucial for the future of Europe, and hence, for the success of the upcoming German Presidency. One can be hopeful that the Western Balkans will be given the needed time on the Presidency agenda, considering the number of related events scheduled for the second half of 2020, as well as the fact that Merkel has been pushing for closer cooperation with the region ever since arriving in the Chancellery and especially with the introduction of the Berlin Process in 2014.

Specifically, this calls for Germany to follow up on the Croatian Presidency and to fill the Zagreb Declaration with life and activity. This means to carry on with the Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans, and to – equally important – pursue vaguely defined promises. During the German Presidency, the EU must show that – and how – they truly are “determined to further intensify its engagement at all levels to support the region’s political, economic and social transformation”²⁰. In the upcoming

²⁰ European Council (May 2020). Zagreb Declaration. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/43776/zagreb-declaration-en-06052020.pdf>

six months there will be plenty of opportunities to undergird hollow pledges.

Already now, the Western Balkans are to be considered, as announced on Twitter by Oliver Várhelyi, Commissioner for Enlargement, in the “EU Next Generation” programme and other EU financing schemes²¹. Furthermore, June marks the month of starting the discussion on the negotiating framework for North Macedonia and Albania, who were given green light to start accession negotiations in March, hopefully clearing the way to officially launch the accession negotiations accession negotiations during the German Presidency (provided that bilateral issues will not be used to block the process for North Macedonia).

Talking about bilateral issues: Last October, the Bulgarian Parliament had adopted a Declaration setting the preconditions, recalling elements from the Treaty of friendship from 2017²² by

tackling some sensitive issues (history, language, minorities, name of the country) under which they can agree on the text of the Negotiation Framework for North Macedonia. Judging from the text of the Declaration, this Bulgarian position has the potential to complicate the process within the EU of aligning the text of the draft negotiating framework²³. This would be particularly the case, if Bulgaria insists on using stricter wording in relation to the implementation of the bilateral agreement, calling upon common EU position as (now) to be formulated into the Zagreb Declaration.

Considering the controversy surrounding Bulgarian-Macedonian relations, the Sofia (Western Balkan) Summit scheduled for autumn, as part of the Berlin Process, is another relevant date on the agenda. Considering that the Berlin Process has been a German-led intergovernmental initiative from the very beginning, this event bears the opportunity to

²¹ @OliverVarhelyi on Twitter (June 2, 2020): “Pleased to announce that with #NextGenerationEU we propose significant additional support for #WesternBalkans & neighbourhood, through more funds for external action guarantee/EFSD+. And under current #EUBudget are proposing as a novelty extension of EFSD to Western Balkans”.

²² Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighborliness, and Cooperation between the Republic of Macedonia and the Republic of Bulgaria <https://mfa.gov.mk/en/document/1712>

²³ The devil is in the details: negotiating North Macedonia’s European Union accession <https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/webA5ENG-2.pdf>

manifest the shared future through more cooperative policies. If used wisely, this Summit – co-chaired by the Bulgarian and Government of North Macedonia – could be used to emphasize the need for solidarity and bilateral cooperation and thus to steer the reconciliation process between the two countries. Furthermore, it could become a venue to foster a compromise on difficult questions in the context of the Negotiation Framework for North Macedonia and present policies which apply the priorities of the German Presidency onto the Western Balkans. During the Sofia Summit, the theme of the German Presidency “Together. Making Europe strong again” should resonate in its priorities, discussions and results, because only with the Western Balkans will Europe find its true strength.

North Macedonia (and Albania) will be the first countries whose accession will be structured along the new Methodology²⁴. While the Commission’s Enlargement

Package will not be presented before autumn, the first Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) could happen before, under the Germany Presidency. The IGC’s are an extremely important cornerstone in the accession negotiations. While the Negotiation Framework sets the conditions under which the country (North Macedonia) will be admitted as EU member, the IGC,²⁵ organised by the EU Presidency, marks the official start of accession negotiation, sets the political and institutional stage, as well as the legal basis for accession negotiations between the EU Member states and North Macedonia. The negotiations as such are managed by the European Commission, on behalf of the EU Member States.

²⁴ The new EU enlargement Methodology: Enhancing the accession process <https://idscs.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Final-Commentary-Dragan-Tilev.pdf>

²⁵ Also known as “accession conference”

Conclusion

The German Presidency is righteously referring to the importance of solidarity, their overarching theme, to tackle challenges of today and prevent crises of tomorrow. By considering their “Corona Presidency” as an opportunity to seize, the German government has clearly positioned itself in favour of a strong, sovereign and united European Union representing the spirit needed to emerge from this crisis. Most importantly though, Germans have made clear that they do not understand their Presidency as a one-runner-sprint, but instead as a relay race. The harmonization of programmes between Presidency trios and a cooperative approach will allow states to tackle long-term strategies and priorities needed for the future of Europe. With a determinate Europeanization debate refreshed now, Europeans are ought to be excited for the course and results of the Conference on the Future of Europe in 2022.

Either way, unity is key to the European self-understanding and future success through the German lens and thus the Presidency reveals a cautiously reorganized approach

to foreign policy, starting with the call towards more European sovereignty and the focus on new strategic partnerships. The events ahead offer many opportunities for Europeans under the German Presidency. In the process of discussing and possibly repainting the European future, North Macedonia and the rest of the Western Balkans will be a constant on the agenda, adequately showing their importance to the future of the European Union. This relevance will hopefully be reflected in their inclusion in the “Next Generation EU”. The task for the German Presidency will be to take concrete actions in further bolstering the unification (and continental integrity) of EU. In line with the Presidency’s priorities this approach must be based on the idea of European solidarity and must be underpinned with economic and strategic arguments on which the following presidencies can build upon.

A busy autumn awaits the Europeans. After the disarray of the Corona-crisis and the struggle of many through the first half of 2020, expectations for the German Presidency are high. In their quest to unite and strengthen Europe, Germans seem determined not to disappoint.

Information about KAS

Freedom, justice, and solidarity are the basic principles underlying the work of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS). The KAS is a political foundation, closely associated with the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) of Germany. We conduct education programs for the society and cooperate with governmental institutions, political parties, civil society organizations and handpicked elites, building strong partnerships along the way. Together with our partners, we make a contribution to the creation of an international order that enables every country to develop in freedom and under its own responsibility.

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Information about IDSCS

IDSCS is a think-tank organisation researching the development of good governance, rule of law and North Macedonia's European integration. IDSCS has the mission to support citizens' involvement in the decision-making process and strengthen the participatory political culture. By strengthening liberal values, IDSCS contributes towards coexistence of diversities.

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