

Coronavirus, sustainability, geopolitics

Germany's EU Council Presidency faces a monumental task

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Today sees Germany assume the Presidency of the Council of the European Union for six months. "Together for Europe's recovery" is the slogan of its tenure. The agenda was already going to be a tough one prior to the coronavirus pandemic, with negotiations on Brexit and the Multiannual Financial Framework. Additionally, Germany must get the EU's internal recovery plan off the ground as part of budget negotiations, thus paving the way for a future of social inclusion, environmental sustainability and economic success in the Union. The Council Presidency also needs to advocate for the EU to position itself within the arena of geopolitical competition between the US and China and forge new alliances.

Traditionally, other member states have placed high expectations on Germany as the EU's largest country. At the same time, the influence of the EU Council Presidency has been greatly curtailed since 2010 by the Lisbon Treaty. The last time that Germany held the Presidency was in 2007. The creation of the permanent position of President of the European Council and the office of High Representative for Foreign Affairs, currently held by Charles Michel and Josep Borrell respectively, has left the Presidency with fewer competences when it comes to making decisions within the EU and representing the Union internationally.

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The level of influence that the Presidency is able to exert depends heavily on the circumstances, on the incumbent nation itself and on its relations with the EU institutions and other member states. Essentially, its role is more one of structuring processes and facilitating compromises than of setting the agenda. Nonetheless, in times of crisis especially, the Presidency can play a key role. For instance, the Dutch EU Presidency was faced in 2016 with the unexpected task of negotiating the EU-Turkey Agreement ('Refugee pact'), as then European Council President Donald Tusk was primarily focused on negotiations with the UK in the run up to the Brexit referendum.

At the beginning of her tenure, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen presented priorities for a European Green Deal and called for a "geopolitical Commission" that would also place greater emphasis on the reform of multilateral institutions. This course has become more significant in light of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic, as they have intensified geopolitical competition, and the transformation to sustainability will only succeed if the recovery programmes also contribute to this transformation.

The German EU Council Presidency should therefore work to ensure that progress in implementing the European Green Deal is not limited to the EU's own borders and that more attention is paid to the global dimension of the initiative. The Green Deal directly impacts third countries. If, for instance, the EU increases the proportion of renewable energies, this will have significant consequences for petroleum-exporting nations in Africa. At the same time, it would do little to benefit global climate objectives if the EU were to forge ahead on its own here. Given that the Green Deal is not only a climate roadmap but also an economic agenda, it offers an opportunity to engage with international partners in frank dialogue on sustainable societal models.

While the US is being heavily hit by the coronavirus pandemic and the transatlantic alliance is suffering collateral damage, China is presenting itself as a global role model and reliable cooperation partner for tackling the pandemic. If we are to retain at least some of the rule-based multilateral order, then Europe needs to find new partners urgently. Cooperation with African nations is becoming more significant as a result. The EU should thus use the upcoming summits and, in particular, its planned summit with the African Union (AU) to reconfigure its relations with key global partners. The EU needs to seize the opportunity and pay close attention to what its African partners expect of it. This is especially important when it comes to supporting the African Continental Free Trade Area. Overall, AU-EU relations should become more dialogue-oriented.

The coronavirus pandemic has also created scope to finally make progress on the integration of EU development policy. It is regularly stressed in Brussels that the EU is a development-policy superpower because it provides more than half of the world's development funding. In practice, while European actors have coordinated their development policy activities more closely in recent years – not least as part of the "Team Europe" approach launched in April of this year – the Union is still a long way from acting as one. EU integration in the area of development policy is not promoted by tables of financial contributions, but rather requires genuine investment and efforts aimed at "working better together". However, this approach should also be expanded beyond the pandemic context and lead to real deepening of cooperation between the member states.

Crises have played a significant role in the EU's history when it comes to advancing the European integration project. Germany is now assuming the EU Council Presidency in the midst of just such a crisis. Consequently, its agenda represents both a monumental task and a tremendous opportunity to lay key foundations for the EU to adopt a responsible role in global affairs.