

Working toward responsible normalcy

Initial situation

The great challenge currently faced by our state has necessitated a range of measures that heavily impact all aspects of social life. These measures, of course, require justification. The government has taken massive action to protect the people and inhibit the spread of the virus, and in so doing has imposed unprecedented restrictions on social and economic life, while encroaching substantially upon fundamental rights.

The current measures are extremely comprehensive and only conditionally nuanced with regard to the specific risk of infection and illness. However, they were necessary as long as there was no concrete knowledge of the actual dynamics of the pandemic, the ways in which the virus spreads and the risks of illness. We must be aware that all decisions made in this situation are risk-based and are made in a climate of uncertainty.

The images from Italy, showing immeasurable tragedy, make it painfully clear that this is a matter of life and death. That is why an initial phase of the government's response prioritised the inhibition of the pandemic and the strict breaking of chains of infection.

However, during this first phase we must proceed gradually and consider new decisions that we may soon face. Such decisions are entirely subject to the fact that there is no historical precedent for this in our state that can be perfectly compared with these circumstances. The responsibility held by the decision makers has thus increased exponentially.

Before three phases of addressing the pandemic are discussed below, it must be emphasised that the suggested steps for dealing with and overcoming the crisis reveal conflicting targets and potentially paradoxical consequences: actions which are medically necessary, can cause significant economic harm. This in turn can have serious social, mental, and medical ramifications.

Although the situation has placed a strain on the decision-making process, it should not lead to having one aspect played off against the other. The appropriate approach is not therefore to favour economic interests over people's health, or state control over individuals' rights. Rather, the goal is to reconcile the complexity and interplay between different forces and legitimate challenges so that we can meet the requirements of our liberal society, one that is built on freedom and the responsibility for the livelihood of all. The conflicting goals are not unsolvable ethical and epistemological dilemmas but rather challenges that require complex decisions.

It must be clear that the goal of inhibiting the pandemic remains in place. In light of the widespread awareness of the seriousness of the danger, the very hygiene-conscious behaviour of much of the population as well as the growing amount of information about the virus, we should now begin making our measures more nuanced and flexible in order to alleviate as many of the negative effects as possible.

The challenges brought about by the coronavirus pandemic are enormous and complex. The more complex the question, the more interdisciplinary the response must be. Every decision has consequences for the individual and for our community as a whole. The government must carefully consider ways of dealing with the resulting ethical dilemmas.

Phase 1: Inhibition, expanding capacities, imparting knowledge

Specific basic rights like the right to assembly, the right to exercise a profession, the freedom of trade, the right to education, religious freedom and the right to travel, have been and continue to be restricted. However, some regulations concerning workplace safety, distance and hygiene have been drastically changed.

Kindergartens and schools, colleges, companies, businesses, restaurants and hotels have closed as a result. Factories have had to adjust their operational structures and processes accordingly, or have even had to shut down. Churches, synagogues and mosques are no longer open for prayer services. It has not been easy for political decision makers at the federal and state levels to impose these restrictions, yet they have been necessary. The mental and physical distance from one another can prevent the exponential spread of the virus effectively and in the long term, while preventing the collapse of our health care system, painful though it may be.

At the same time, the federal and state governments have enacted unprecedentedly large support measures in various areas in order to halt, to the best of their abilities, the foreseeable consequences of the restrictions:

Economic measures

- Fiscal liquidity aid for companies, e.g. opportunities for deferring tax payments, lowering tax prepayments and abstaining from compulsory enforcement or penalties for delayed payment
- Billions in protection for factories and companies through affordable loans and sureties, as well as accelerated processing
- Aid for founders and start-ups, e.g. by extending entrepreneur stipends and improving start-up equity programmes
- Establishing special funds to finance all necessary expenses for overcoming the coronavirus crisis

Social measures

- Using relaxed payment requirements to make short-time compensation more flexible

- Relief for the self-employed, the elderly and those with reduced income through easier access to basic security benefits
- Simplified access to children's benefits
- Continuing benefits for social service providers
- Takeover of parent payments for child care services
- Incentives for taking on system-relevant employment in the health care system or agriculture for workers receiving short time compensation
- Exceptions to work time requirements to secure the health care industry, public services, and public safety and order
- Relaxations on additional earnings for retirees

Rental, insolvency and criminal proceedings law

- Protection for renters by adjusting anti-termination regulations for contracts
- Prevention of insolvency proceedings by suspending the insolvency reporting obligation
- Extension of a maximum possible break in criminal proceedings to prevent infections

At the same time, myriad damages caused by the lockdown must be given as much consideration as the health risks of the coronavirus pandemic.

Damage of the lockdown – economic, social and medical

- The **social damage** is extremely great. The risk of **isolation and neglect of the elderly**, because of the extensive contact restrictions, is real. This is in addition to the **lack of food supplies in day cares and schools for children from impoverished families, homelessness**, increasing rates of **domestic violence and child endangerment**, the **greatly varying forms of home-schooling** during the lockdown, and not least, the **psychosocial ramifications** of the economically extremely difficult situation.
- **Sick and mentally vulnerable people** are also suffering greatly from the lockdown.
- The suspension of **many important medical treatments, check-ups and rehabilitation measures** has had undesired medical ramifications.
- The **economic costs** of the lockdown are **enormously high and are increasing every day, presumably disproportionately** – especially against the backdrop of economic decline and structural change in some key industries, which had begun even before the coronavirus pandemic. Various industries have been affected greatly (e.g. food service, retail, the automotive industry, and mechanical and plant engineering have been impacted severely, the chemical industry and others less so). In addition, numerous companies listed in the SDAX, MDAX and DAX have reported heavy losses in the past weeks,

leaving them susceptible to undesired acquisitions. This affects service providers, and in the long term can impact the technology and finance sector. Many self-employed people, small business owners and companies in the mid-sized sector are facing existential threats as well.

From the wave of social solidarity to the risk of polarisation

- Current polls by the Allensbach Institute illustrate that people are currently feeling high levels of **fear and worry**, certainly (partially) induced by media reporting and general communication about the pandemic. At the same time, the government still has great support for far-reaching measures like the lockdown. There are **fears of the disease and of dying, but also fears of loss of employment or prospects, of poverty and social decline**.
- This concern is only partially attributable to the direct health risks of the virus and is **largely due to the collateral economic damage of the countermeasures**:
 - 47 per cent of the population are currently greatly concerned that they could become infected.
 - 71 per cent are greatly concerned that relatives could become infected.
 - 82 per cent are greatly concerned about the effects on the German economy.
- The **atmosphere remains shaped by a deep sense of worry**: only one fifth of the population is optimistic about the next twelve months, whereas the majority view the coming year with pronounced fears or at least scepticism. Nearly one half of the population fears that we are heading toward a global disaster. **One third of the population is experiencing great mental stress due to the current situation – women more so than men, weaker social classes more so than the higher social classes**, and independent artists more so than permanent employees.
- The **actual scope of the impact is great**: 85 per cent of the population expects an economic downturn, 46 per cent a protracted downturn. One third of the population is currently affected by plant closures or short time work or by living in a household in which another member of the household is affected by this. Nearly two thirds of self-employed people and freelancers are affected by closures and massive decreases in earnings.
- **Three quarters of the population report that their lives have changed greatly or very greatly**. 71 per cent perceive these changes as a severe restriction. 78 per cent even feel that the comprehensive contact limitation is a serious restriction, and 72 per cent deeply miss the contact that they are used to.

- In spite of broad support, only four out of ten citizens are in favour of upholding the restrictions for inhibiting the pandemic as long as possible. **The self-employed, freelancers and workers who fear for the security of their jobs are especially in favour of loosening restrictions.**
- Citizens are currently most heavily affected by the **uncertainty of how this pandemic will continue to develop**. Three quarters of the population are affected by this uncertainty, as well as 84 per cent of freelancers and self-employed people, and 87 per cent of people worried about their jobs. It is therefore more important to present the population with a strategy for a path toward responsible normalcy and to communicate about gradual relaxations that will be possible in the near future, even in the absence of specific timeframes.
- There is concern that the initial phase of social solidarity is being followed by a **phase of polarisation**, in which people's doubts, worries and urgencies become greater, and the willingness to comply with the measures decreases. The danger of a split in society entails significant conflicts (young-old, poor-rich, educated-uneducated). Grave social conflicts and the amplification of social justice issues could be the result, with **the risk of another group of people slipping into precarious conditions**.
- The threat posed by the coronavirus is perceived by many to be a unifying force. "Everyone is equal under the virus" and "it unites us all". **Citizens currently see themselves as an equal member of a large community sharing the same fate**. Many **previously overlooked professions** (caretakers, cashiers, cleaning staff and law enforcement, etc.) **in particular are experiencing high levels of visibility and appreciation from the public**.
- Existing class differences and divisive trends are (still) overshadowed by the willingness to take collective measures and accept restrictions. Nuanced measures are desired by many, but they are also the source of **worry that this solidarity will vanish and new egoisms/rivalries/cleavages will form among the population**. This worry can be counteracted by **carefully communicating the relevance of each measure of differentiation to the community**. As part of an overarching and nuanced plan, every citizen wants to know exactly what is now expected of them.

The first priority is expanding the medical capacities as quickly as possible.

Strengthening health care – quickly expanding medical knowledge.

- **Capacities in the health care industry** (beds in intensive care units, respirators, protecting clothing, medical staff) must continue to be

expanded, the supply of materials must be improved, and staffing must be increased.

- At the same time, improved **capacities** for managing the situation are required. The availability and occupation rate of intensive care unit beds with and without respirators in particular must be centrally recorded and controlled in real time.
- Furthermore, improved availability of health agencies and a better spread of information between health agencies must be achieved.
- We must urgently **expand our knowledge of the virus and COVID-19**:
 - **How many** people are already infected?
 - How high is the **estimated rate of unknown cases**?
 - What are the conditions under which the virus does or does not spread?
 - Which **measures** have what **effect on the spread of the virus**?
 - **Who gets sick** how severely, and why?
- The **research project "Covid-19 case cluster study" in the district of Heinsberg** has provided the first verified, representative insights into the estimated number of unknown cases (WHO protocol standard [https://www.who.int/publications-detail/household-transmission-investigation-protocol-for-2019-novel-coronavirus-\(2019-ncov\)-infection](https://www.who.int/publications-detail/household-transmission-investigation-protocol-for-2019-novel-coronavirus-(2019-ncov)-infection)), the paths through which the virus spreads, and the effect of certain inhibitive measures.
- **Further studies** and tests must be carried out. COVID-19 patients throughout Germany, Europe, and the world could fill out a survey and record sensor data (e.g. heart and breathing frequency, body temperature and oxygen saturation) every day through an app in order to obtain more precise data.
- Parallel to this, the intensive **efforts in Germany and around the globe to find suitable treatment methods** (e.g. Remdesivir, Chloroquine) must be accelerated.
- The development of **further testing procedures**, in particular antibody tests and quick tests for infection, must continue. Methods like pooling can also be helpful with expansion, i.e. testing multiple people at a time, whereby only a positive result will lead to individual testing.
- In order to be able to increase the **number of tests** for infection and improve **reporting** (target: up to **500,000 tests** per day), the following measures are required:
 - Swift establishment of a **testing infrastructure** by involving more labs based on medical criteria (RKI), the creation of **mobile test stations**, support from THW, Bundeswehr, DRK

- Establishment of an **electronic real-time reporting system** can significantly improve and standardise the time-critical provision of relevant data.
- **All tests and all results** (positive and negative) must be **reported**.
- **A strong expansion of testing will inevitably lead to more reported cases**. This effect must be considered and classified by medical experts when analysing the situation and development.

At the same time, the path toward gradual normalcy must be taken as quickly as possible and as slowly as necessary.

Controlling the return to normalcy – creating a broad basis of information

- **Task forces should be established** at the federal and state level **to collect and evaluate all relevant information while considering the medical, social and economic risks**, so that they will then be able to recommend suitable **measures**.
- A **data and fact monitor (dashboard)** must be created that allows for **continuous monitoring**, namely by providing all **decision-related indicators** (e.g. epidemiological, economic, psychological, social) and also presents conflicting targets, all on the basis of constant data retrieval.
- The goal must be, with the help of a **public dialogue** and based on transparent facts, to reach an agreement on **national, uniform criteria for a nuanced strategy that considers risk areas, risk groups and relevance for social and economic life and will facilitate** a gradual return to “responsible normalcy”.
- It must be noted that these individual steps cannot be steered as thoroughly in some areas as might be desired and, depending on the course of developments; some steps, once implemented, may need to be taken back.

Phase 2: Gradually opening up social and public life

Requirements for gradual opening

- If the **health care system is not foreseeably overwhelmed by the pandemic** and the corresponding **requirements for better monitoring of the crisis** have been met, the return to normalcy in the respective areas of social life can be expedited.
- This **return will be a process** that is not based on a specific schedule and plan of measures, but instead, will be tentatively implemented as part of a **system of learning**.

- **The specific steps and speed of the opening** must be based on the following considerations and **utilise distance as a regulatory basic principle of reopening**:
 - In which areas is the risk of infection high or low? An opening can occur faster or slower accordingly.
 - For whom would infection be particularly dangerous or severe? These groups must continue to adhere to protective measures.
 - Which areas are especially important to the economy and society?
 - How well can protective measures be implemented in the respective area? For example, can distances be maintained and/or protective clothing worn at work?
- Consideration of **which areas can undergo relaxations with relatively little risk** must be prioritised.

Gradual opening

- One potential route may lie in **gradually allowing for individual aspects of public life and steering inhibition measures in a more nuanced manner**. This includes school instruction, universities, retail, contact restriction.
- We are entering uncharted territory with this approach because a situation such as this pandemic has never existed before in Europe. We will slowly regain our freedoms. **There will be backtracking**. It is likely that we will repeatedly be confronted with new increases in the infection rate. **There may be smaller and perhaps greater infection waves locally and nationwide**. We must respond to this quickly and strictly at the regional and situational level.
- Each new infection wave will require that we take steps back: **we will have to react quickly, consistently, and in a targeted way**.
- We will **first have to learn how to live with the virus before we can completely control it**. Learning is not always easy, and it comes with disappointments and setbacks. But it is always worth the effort and makes us not only smarter, but stronger.

Testing, isolating and treating consistently

- When the corresponding **test infrastructures are in place**, the **testing process should be expanded**:
 - **People with symptoms** and confirmed **contact individuals** will **always be tested**.
 - People in especially **vulnerable professions** and in areas where many people with a high risk of illness are living (e.g. old age and care facilities)

- will be **regularly tested in short intervals** (e.g. pooling).
- Furthermore, there should be regular "**sentinel testing**" of randomly selected, **representative groups** in order to obtain a better overview of the entire situation.
- **Infection chains** must be followed as consistently as possible, which requires
 - a quick **build-up of personnel** in health agencies, e. g. by supporting medical students, state public servants, the armed forces, etc., if necessary,
 - **data protection-compliant digital solutions** (e.g. mobile apps that record contacts with other users via Bluetooth) that can help **find and warn contact persons** (e.g. the European approach PEPP-PT: <https://www.pepp-pt.org>).
- People with a **confirmed infection** must be isolated and remain in quarantine for about 14 days. Social-psychological support may be appropriate in individual cases.

Protecting children, facilitating work – educational services are important

- Children and adolescents have a basic right to education. Access to educational services should thus be made available as quickly as possible - within a responsible framework and with adherence to high safety standards.
- This can also **reduce many social risks** (provision of food, education and activity, structured daily routines).
- Child care in care centres and the (partial) opening of schools can **give employees and self-employed persons more freedoms**.
- Here, too, the **risks must be assessed as precisely as possible** and given careful consideration when schools resume, such as by **differentiating classroom formats (digital instruction) between the upper, middle and lower levels, or staggered instruction at school**. The widely varying levels of technical infrastructure at the schools and special needs of families must be considered and concretely approached in this phase through the **acceleration of digitisation initiatives**. The ability to have digital instruction must no longer depend on the place of residence or parents' income.
- Teachers and caretakers who do not belong to a risk group can be given priority employment at day care centres and personal instruction. This will impact the possibility to open day cares and schools.

- At universities and other institutions of higher education, the options depend heavily on the respective department. Wherever possible, **colleges should still use online lectures and seminars.**

Protecting oneself and others – protecting risk groups

- Even a gradual opening requires that **risk groups can continue to benefit from safety measures.** Based on what is currently known, these are primarily older people (the risk increases greatly starting at the age of 50) as well as smokers and people with pre-existing conditions (especially lung and heart diseases). This equates to up to 20 million people in Germany. **Protection must be provided on an individual basis and must not lead to new forms of age-based discrimination.**
- Adherence to **distance, hygiene and conduct rules** is especially important when dealing with people from risk groups, and **contact in general should be kept to a minimum.** Staff, like medical personnel, at old age and care facilities should be regularly tested (e.g. with pooling procedures).
- A **ban on visits** or at least severe restrictions, in conjunction with **consistent testing**, can remain necessary for **old age and care facilities**, especially in hot spots. The **self-determination of the people affected must be given due consideration** in this regard.
- At the same time, the opportunities for **accompaniment and support** for people in risk groups should be expanded, primarily through financial assistance, but also (for example) through volunteer engagement.
- The financing opportunities for **overcoming subsequent mental and social damage** from the restrictive measures (psychotherapeutic assistance, counselling services, educational support, etc.) should be improved.

Responsibly reducing economic costs – closely involving companies

- **Economic activities must resume** as quickly as possible, if done **responsibly.** **Protective measures** (masks, distance, partitions) must still be taken as much as possible. **Retail businesses** can, for example, open up sooner than **nightclubs**, and strict regulations are conceivable for **food service** (table distances, limited number of guests). **Large events** like **Bundesliga football matches** with spectators, but also **conferences and conventions**, will **not be able to take place** for the foreseeable future.
- **Cultural services**, such as concerts and theatre performances, can take place in a new format and possible with corresponding restrictions (distance rules, limited number of viewers).

- Valuable experience with **various types of digital work** (mobile work, video conferences, etc.) has been made throughout this crisis. Digital work can continue to be a helpful measure wherever it seems appropriate and productive.
- In addition, we must **make note of dependencies, connections and non-linearities**, especially in complex industries. The state cannot control resumption in any way it pleases (no planned economy, no social technology of the 1970s).
- **Companies must be closely involved in these processes**, because this is the only place where we have knowledge of industry-specific interrelations that must be considered during the comprehensive reactivation of value-added chains.
- The **functionality and efficiency of public administration** must be indefinitely ensured in order to avoid delays (e.g. in planning authorities, property deed offices, environmental authorities, vehicle authorisation offices). The government should, where possible, keep procedures designed to strengthen the economy as unbureaucratic and as simple as possible.

Not sealing Germany away from Europe

- Especially in this crisis, the **idea of establishing an even closer union in Europe must be revitalised**.
- **European solidarity** and the European guarantee of fundamental rights and freedoms are an **important resource in overcoming the pandemic**.
- **Open borders** and a functioning EU domestic market are important for **economic, social** and **cultural** reasons.

Reinforcing trust – communicating openly and transparently

- The **gradual loosening of the lockdown will foreseeably be far more difficult than the abrupt halting of social and economic life**. It will have to take place over multiple steps. Communication will also become more complex and nuanced (e.g. various measures depending on population group, region or industry).
- **Moderate political communication** is all the more crucial in these times in order to avoid polarisation and “playing off” the economy against health, freedom against trust in the state, crisis winners against losers, and preventing a social schism.

- The state of fear reflected in the word EXIT must be transformed into a **state of risk-awareness** in order to give the people hope and reinforce trust in those making the decisions. For example, focusing on the gradual return to “**responsible normalcy**” is appropriate here.
- These inhibitive times have turned the population into a community in fate. **New lines of conflict and other disruptions must not arise from the gradual reopening.**
- This new normalcy will at first primarily be shaped by necessary measures of limitation and restriction. This requires a **campaign of responsible conduct** for the entire population:
 - **Physical distance, hygiene** (washing hands) and other **rules of conduct** (coughing and sneezing etiquette) will remain crucial.
 - Recent studies show that wearing simple **mouth protection** is very prudent (e.g. on **public transportation** and similar situations in enclosed spaces). It is critical that **enough masks** are available, they are **used properly**, and the far more effective **distance regulations are not given less consideration as a result**. They primarily serve to prevent an unknowingly infected individual from infecting others in a public space. The simple, so-called community masks do not provide complete protection against infection.
- The **process of normalisation** is based on **constructive monitoring by the media**. The discussion must be public, transparent and honest. No presumed “bans on thinking” must be imposed, but rather solutions based on facts must be found within the joint discourse.

Phase 3: Stabilisation of a responsible normalcy

A new coexistence

- Even when many areas of public life have returned to relative normalcy, we will still need a **new social understanding of proximity and politeness** for some time: people will not shake hands or hug one another. People will maintain a physical distance from others, and may wear a protective mask.
- This also requires **stringent observation of oneself and others**: am I showing symptoms of a respiratory illness? Are my co-workers, children or relatives showing those symptoms? Anyone who coughs or sneezes stays at home, going neither to work nor school nor kindergarten, does not go out in public and also does not partake in public gatherings. The individual will thus gain acceptance, even appreciation from their employer or teacher.

- **Companies and authorities are using their new experience with mobile work.** Telephone or video conferences are becoming more common, and unnecessary business trips are being avoided.
- **The crisis has highlighted significant flaws in digital communication.** A comprehensive upswing in Germany requires a **digitisation offensive in all areas**, especially education.
- **It is important that adherence is voluntary but consistent.** We must all be aware that our freedom requires adherence to the rules. Freedom also means responsibility, and consideration for others.

Softening the blow of long-term economic consequences

- There will be more **economic ramifications** in the interim, e.g. through continuation of the current online retail trend and movement away from local retail, or problems with commissioning individual industries due to non-functioning, **international value-added chains**, or restrictions in production, commerce or transport. **Flexible economic policy measures** are required in these cases.
- Market-listed companies that are particularly affected by the crisis could become easy targets for undesired **attempted acquisitions by foreign companies** due to the drastic exchange losses. **Start-ups are also vulnerable.** This must be considered in order to take any necessary countermeasures.
- **Targeted fiscal relief** for particularly affected groups may be an important breakthrough signal. The permanent financial performance of the state must be considered here.
- Negative expectations among the population can lead to a lack of purchasing long-lasting consumer goods and investments. This could be counteracted by **specific demand stimulation programmes** if this proves to inhibit economic recovery (see economic crisis 2009). A temporary and targeted reduction of the value added tax can be a suitable instrument in this regard.
- The key for long-term economic recovery following the crisis lies in **ensuring companies' competitiveness.** Structural reforms with regard to regulation, but also the higher corporate taxation (in an international comparison), must not be taboo.
- **Aid mechanisms for particularly affected countries must be established at the European level.** The revitalisation of a strong, competitive domestic market also financially requires a joint European effort.

Learning from the crisis

- The prior **epidemic/pandemic plans** have proven to be clearly insufficient and not effective enough. Thus, in the long term, there must be a new preventive plan (measures, responsibilities) for similar crises. This also includes scenarios adjusted on the basis of current experience.
- The continuous reduction of **domestic production of important medical equipment** (masks, protective clothing, etc.), as well as **medication**, over the years must be amended for the public interest.
- **European and international coordination** must be improved so that countries in doubt can mutually help one another and not isolate themselves or even work against one another. Europe must be able to react independently and jointly to a pandemic in the interest of European sovereignty.
- One important lesson to be learned from the coronavirus crisis is **rethinking the import dependency of many “system-related” products and value-added chains**. But we only bring these back to Europe (or keep them here) via a competitive environment.
- Crisis entails a threat, but also **opportunity**. The many economic, social and cultural challenges should result in an open and constructive, social dialogue. This includes the openness to fundamental changes as well as creative and positive development.

In this current situation, science can make a significant contribution toward better understanding the challenges, it can help expand perspectives, and present possible solutions. Our country's democratic institutions must make the decisions, especially in a time of crisis. **The weighing of ethically relevant conflicts must be made visible, apparent and comprehensible** in the interest of the continued legitimacy of these institutions' actions. Over the past weeks, citizens have displayed remarkable understanding of the necessity of massive restrictions. This confirms the **faith in working together on the path toward responsible normalcy through public discourse**. Drastic measures must be taken to prevent an exponential spread of the pandemic. Flexible, targeted answers must be found to ward off the avoidable damage of the lockdown. **Every decision has consequences, and to each decision there are alternatives.**

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