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Corona Measures and Corona Debates: A Mediator's View from Germany

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Corona is managed under different circumstances around the world. These depend on resources and infrastructure, and also on political interpretations of the science and of the effects of spreading infection in society. There are also cultural factors that play a role here – concerning the political culture of a country and also the values that prevail in the wider society. Public acceptance of whatever measures are decided is crucial, and is culturally shaped.

This is becoming very apparent to me in Germany at present, where, although I have been living here for well over half my life to date, I am still sometimes able to take an outsider's view. Things are getting problematic here right now, not just in terms of a third wave of increasing infection but in ever hardening debates about the way to react to this. These debates are splitting society and dividing friends and families, in a country where the idea of "social cohesion" is so highly valued. This cohesion is undergoing another battering, in addition to the ongoing damage it suffered due to differences of opinion as to how to react to the "refugee crisis" of 2015 and after and the issue of migration.

In the following I will try to take not just an outsider's view, but a mediator's view, while noting up front that I am not free of my own opinions on the Corona situation.

German politics has just announced further restrictions, including closing down many services and institutions again for five days over Easter. The hope that restrictions might be relaxed after the lockdown that went on until the end of February is receding, and it now looks like there will be considerable restrictions through until summer – or longer. Matters are made worse by the slow pace of vaccination.

What is notable is that reactions have shifted. There are more and more voices in the media and among the population who are highly critical of restrictions. People have had enough. The argument is that basic human and constitutional rights are being violated. This is where the matter becomes cultural. This country has seen two dictatorships that can be remembered and is proud of establishing a resilient free and liberal society. The heritage is a healthy critical view of the role and remit of the state.

Critics of the present government are saying that citizens' freedoms are being disregarded and that the state has overstepped the bounds of what is permissible. The argument is getting more and more heated, and it looks likely to escalate in two ways: people will disregard Corona restrictions

and there will be more public protest.

On the other hand there are those who appeal to the science and the need to contain infections to protect the health service. These voices were prominent last year and were generally heard. Now that restrictions and their economic effects on ordinary people, small businesses, or their effects on families whose children are missing schooling are set to continue, these voices are no longer determining the discourse. They are faced with ever more criticism that the measures that are taken are not specific enough in terms of targeting risk groups and that they are damaging a whole society and restricting basic rights and freedoms disproportionally.

So on the one hand we have those who say that human rights are being trampled on by the other side.

On the other hand we have those that say that the other side's lack of adherence to necessary restrictions will lead to deaths and overloading the health system.

What would a mediator do?

A mediator would ask the parties to look for the legitimate interests behind the mutual accusations. It might look like this.

The accusations and positional stances are:

"You are disregarding basic rights and violating the constitution. This has to stop."

"You are disregarding necessary public health concerns in an emergency. You are irresponsible."

As with so many conflicts and disputes emotions are running high and there is plenty of blaming going on.

The positive and interests-based underside would be:

"We are asking for solutions in which a debate on basic rights is heard, and that we see this in decisions made, with a vision for action that will ensure that these are respected as far as possible."

"We are concerned about our health system's ability to cope with this, and we are concerned for human lives. We need a vision for action that will protect people."

This is not an easy time to be a politician with the responsibility to make decisions. It seems that you cannot get much right. At present this country's political leadership, whether in government or opposition, seems to be making few attempts to bring these two sides of an increasingly polarised debate together. They are not doing this in the rhetoric and debate, and they are not doing it in their decisions on what measures to implement and how. The public are faced with a starkly binary choice as to where their allegiances are. In hindsight, the debate here needed to integrate both views in the middle of last year already, but back then everyone hoped that Corona would be done by now. Now it is looking like it might be too late to find a socially cohesive approach to dealing with it.

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