

Germany's New Coronavirus Thinking

Berlin tolerates more Covid-19 spread for the sake of reopening its economy.

By The Editorial Board
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A social distancing warning sign stands on display at the entrance of a Bavarian-themed beer hall ahead of reopening in Berlin, May 14.

Photo: Krisztian Bocsi/Bloomberg News

A strange thing happened in Germany this week: Covid-19 started spreading a bit faster and officials and the public managed to cope. It's an important benchmark for other governments as they allow their own economies to emerge from viral hibernation.

Scientists at the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), the German government's epidemiological advisory service, calculate that the coronavirus resumed its spread through the population as the country's lockdown started easing in late April. The reproduction rate, or R0, was above 1 for several days this week, and as high as 1.1 last weekend. That means that each person infected with the virus transmits it on average to 1.1 other people—exponential growth.

This is as much a political event as a medical one. It seems inevitable that the coronavirus will spread as rapidly as any respiratory virus as lockdowns ease. But Chancellor Angela Merkel made a transmission rate of less than 1 a central plank of her reopening plan.

In an April press conference, Mrs. Merkel instructed Germans on precisely how overwhelmed hospitals would become at each level of R₀ above 1. The RKI estimated the transmission rate at around 0.8 before Mrs. Merkel started easing the lockdown. Germans were warned that restrictions might return if the disease resumed its spread.

Yet now Berlin and the 16 state governments responsible for local reopening policies are discovering they can tolerate a somewhat higher reproduction rate after all. Mrs. Merkel is sticking to a broader plan she announced last week under which most shops can reopen, schools will resume soon, and religious services and some sports will be allowed. Some state governments are going further by reopening restaurants or museums.

This may be partly because German voters are reconsidering how they weigh coronavirus risk against the physical, emotional, social and economic costs of a lockdown. Anti-lockdown protests occurred in several cities last weekend. Opinion polls suggest most Germans still support their government's handling of the crisis, but the costs have been as immense as everywhere else.

If Germany learns to live with a higher reproduction rate, that will be an important lesson for other politicians: Give voters more credit. Leaders from U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo continue to promise reproduction rates below 1 as they reopen their economies. Perhaps the public realizes this is unrealistic and won't punish politicians who take some virus risks for the sake of restoring voters' livelihoods.