



Subsidiary Crisis Management in the COVID-19 Pandemic: Germany's Federalist Experiment in Transborder Perspective

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Contrary to the centralizing tendencies observed in many European states, **Germany dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic in a fully subsidiary manner**. The health and administrative response was deployed almost exclusively at the level of the *Länder*, with the Conference of Minister-Presidents providing political coordination between the federal and regional executives. This organization, unique in Europe, has led to **better informed, more proportional and more transparent decision-making**, allowing for comparison between approaches and fostering political action closer to the field.

Elsewhere in Europe, and especially in border regions, **crisis management has often been negatively affected by uncoordinated and overly centralized actions taken by national governments**. However, the structure of the pandemic was mainly regional or local. **Vertical and homogeneous political action thus often resulted in a false dilemma between inefficiency and disproportionate public action**, which led to strong tensions between national capitals and regions.

In cross-border areas, unilateral closures of internal EU borders have greatly disrupted the daily lives of the population and fostered a strong sense of injustice. After thirty to sixty years of uninterrupted freedom of movement, these decisions have come as a shock. For lack of sufficient consultation, member states were not fully aware of the concrete consequences of their policy decisions. National resentment and arbitrary spatial divisions reemerged as a consequence of the implementation of policies which seemed out of touch with reality; **confidence in the European project was greatly undermined**.

This situation is not inescapable. Drawing inspiration from the German, but also Belgian or Swiss institutional models, **we suggest a subsidiary approach to crisis management** in which local, regional and Euroregional

levels would be fully involved. This approach would ensure greater proportionality and strengthen citizens' control over their territories.

In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic reveals the need for a **paradigm shift in cross-border cooperation**. Today, Euroregions, which mainly serve as platforms for long-term projects, deserve to be fully integrated in operational coordination and planning, as close as possible to the reality of cross-border living areas and the daily life of the population. **Thanks to a broad coalition of regional and local actors as well as targeted initiatives, such a development could be driven from the bottom up.**

Our work builds on twenty interviews conducted with local, regional and Euro-regional officials from a dozen European countries. In order to rebuild interregional cooperation in Europe on a more solid foundation and draw comprehensive institutional lessons from the pandemic, we propose four concrete measures:

1. Local, regional and national actors should adopt a **charter enshrining the need for a subsidiary approach to crisis management**, making it possible to federate political will as close as possible to the citizens and to launch a continental political movement.
2. A **campaign to systematically map existing living areas** should be launched in order to determine the most appropriate scale for decision-making and crisis management.
3. A **directive making it mandatory to set up European Groupings for Territorial Cooperation (EGTC) in border areas, and requiring their consultation prior to any border closure measures**, should be adopted.
4. The EU's active coordination role should be formalized through the creation of a **new configuration of the Council of the European Union, in charge of the coordination of interregional policies and crisis management.**

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