

An address to the nation by Federal Chancellor Merkel

18 March 2020

Fellow citizens,

The coronavirus is changing daily life in our country dramatically at the present. Our idea of normality, of public life, social togetherness - all of this is being put to the test as never before.

Millions of you cannot go to work, your children cannot go to school or kindergarten, theatres and cinemas and shops are closed, and, perhaps what is most difficult, we all miss social encounters that we otherwise take for granted. Of course, each of us has many questions and concerns in a situation like this, about the days ahead.

I'm addressing you in this unconventional way today because I want to tell you what guides me as Federal Chancellor and all my colleagues in the Federal Government in this situation. This is part of what open democracy is about: that we make political decisions transparent and explain them. That we justify and communicate our actions as best we can, so that people are able to understand them.

I firmly believe that we will pass this test if all citizens genuinely see this as THEIR task.

Allow me therefore to say that this is serious. Please also take this seriously. Since German reunification, no, since the Second World War, there has not been a challenge for our country in which action in a spirit of solidarity on our part was so important.

I would like explain where we currently stand in this epidemic and what the Federal Government and the state levels are doing to protect everyone in our community and to limit the economic, social and cultural fallout. However, I also want to tell you why all of you are needed here, and what each and every individual can do to help.

As far as the epidemic is concerned – and everything I tell you about this comes from the Federal Government's ongoing consultations with the experts from the Robert Koch Institute and other scientists and virologists: the most intensive research is being conducted around the world, but there is still neither a way to treat the coronavirus, nor is there a vaccine.

As long as this is the case – and this is what is guiding all of our actions – then only one thing matters, namely that we slow the spread of the virus, flatten the curve over the course of several months and buy time. Time in which the research community can develop a medicine and vaccine. But, above all, time to allow those who fall ill to receive the best possible treatment.

Germany has an excellent healthcare system, perhaps one of the best in the world. We can take solace in this. But our hospitals would also be completely overwhelmed if, in the shortest space of time, too many patients were admitted, suffering severe symptoms as a result of the virus.

These are not just abstract numbers in statistics, but this is about a father or grandfather, a mother or grandmother, a partner – this is about people. And we are a community in which each life and each person counts.

I would like first of all to address all those who as doctors, nurses or in a different capacity work in our hospitals and in our healthcare system in general. You are on the front lines of this fight for us. You are the first to see the sick and to see how severe the symptoms of the virus can sometimes be. And, day in, day out, you keep going back to work and are there to help people. You are doing tremendous work, and I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

So, our aim is to slow the virus down as it makes its way through Germany. And we must, and this is absolutely vital, focus our attention on one thing above all else, namely powering down public life as far as possible. With reason and a sense of proportion, of course, since the state will continue to function. It goes without saying that supply chains will continue to be guaranteed, and we want to keep as much economic activity going as possible.

But we must now reduce everything that could put people at risk, everything that could harm not only individuals, but also the community. We must limit the risk of one person infecting another as much as we possibly can.

I know how dramatic the restrictions already are: no events, no trade fairs, no concerts any more, and, for the time being, also no school, no university, no kindergarten, no more playing at the playground. I know how invasive the closures that the Federation and the Länder have agreed to are in our lives, and also in terms of how we see ourselves as a democracy. These are restrictions, the likes of which the Federal Republic has never seen before.

Allow me to assure you that, for someone like me, for whom the freedom of travel and the freedom of movement were a hard-fought right, such restrictions can only be justified if they are absolutely imperative. These should never be put in place lightly in a democracy and should only be temporary. - But they are vital at the moment in order to save lives.

This is why, since the beginning of the week, more intensive border controls and restrictions on entry for a number of our most important neighbouring countries have been in force.

Things are already very difficult for the economy, for major companies, and also for small businesses, for shops, restaurants and freelancers. Things will get even more difficult in the weeks to come.

I assure you that the Federal Government is doing everything that it can to cushion the economic impact - and, above all, to safeguard jobs.

We can and we will do whatever it takes in order to help our companies and their employees get through this most difficult time.

And everyone can rest assured that the food supply is guaranteed at all times, and that if supermarket shelves happen to be empty on one day, they will be filled again on the next. I want to tell everyone going to the supermarket that bulk-buying makes sense; it always has. But only within reason. Panic buying, as if there's no tomorrow, is pointless and, at the end of the day, shows a complete lack of solidarity.

And allow me to express my thanks to those who are too seldom thanked. Those working as supermarket cashiers or restocking shelves, who are currently doing one of the most difficult jobs that there are at the moment. Thank you for being there for your fellow citizens and for keeping us all going.

Let me talk now about what I believe is most urgent today. All measures taken by the state would come to nothing if we were to fail to use the most effective means for preventing the virus from spreading too rapidly – and that is we ourselves. As indiscriminately as each one of us can be affected by the virus, each and every one of us must help. First and foremost, by taking seriously what matters today. Not panicking, but also not thinking for a single moment that he or she doesn't matter after all. No one is expendable. Everyone counts, and we need a collective effort.

That is the message an epidemic brings home – how vulnerable we all are, how much we depend on the considerate behaviour of others and, ultimately, how, through joint action, we can protect ourselves and offer one another encouragement and support.

Every individual counts. We are not condemned to accept the spread of this virus as an inevitable fact of life. We have the means to fight it. We must be considerate and keep a safe distance from one another. Virologists are giving us clear advice: no more handshakes, we must wash our hands thoroughly and often, and we must keep at least one and a half metre's distance between ourselves and others. Ideally, we should avoid all contact with the elderly, because they are particularly at risk.

I know that this is asking a great deal of us. Especially when times are hard, we want to be close to one another. We show affection by staying close, and by reaching out to each other. But at this time, we must do the exact opposite. Every single one of us must understand that, right now, the only way to show we care is by keeping our distance.

A well-meant visit or a trip that is not essential can spread infection and really should not take place right now. There is a reason why experts say that grandparents and grandchildren should not come into contact with each other right now.

Everyone who avoids unnecessary encounters helps all those who are in hospitals providing care to more and more people each day. So that is how we will save lives. This will be difficult for many, and it will also be important not to abandon anyone and to take care of all those who need a dose of cheer and encouragement. As families, and as a society, we will find other ways to help each other.

Even now, we have come up with many creative ideas for standing up to this virus and its impact on society. Even now, grandchildren are recording podcasts for their grandparents, letting them know they are not alone.

We all must discover how we can show affection and express friendship. We are staying in touch via Skype, phone, email, and maybe also by writing old-fashioned letters. The post, after all, is being delivered. We're hearing about beautiful examples of neighbours helping one another. People are assisting the elderly who cannot themselves go shopping. I am certain there's plenty more we can do. We will prove, as a community, that we will not abandon one another.

I therefore urge you to abide by the rules that will remain in place for the time being. The government will constantly reassess what measures can be adjusted and also what further measures may still be necessary.

This is a developing situation, and we will ensure that we continue to learn from it so that we can adjust our thinking and deploy new instruments at any time. If we do so, then we will explain our reasons once again.

Therefore, I call on you to not believe any rumours, but rather only the official messages that we will always translate into many languages.

We are a democracy. We thrive not because we are forced to do something, but because we share knowledge and encourage active participation. This is a historic task, and it can only be mastered if we face it together.

I have absolutely no doubt that we will overcome this crisis. But how many victims will it claim? How many loved ones will we lose? The answer, to a great extent, lies in our hands. Right now, we can take decisive action all together. We can accept these current limitations and support one another.

The situation is serious, and the outcome uncertain.

Our success will also largely depend on how disciplined each and every one of us is in following the rules.

Even though this is something we have never experienced before, we must show that we can act warm-heartedly and rationally – and thereby save lives. It is up to each and every one of us to do so, without any exception.

Take good care of yourself and your loved ones.

Thank you.