



Interview with Patrizia Nanz and Sébastien Treyer

Achieving a Sustainable Transformation of Europe from the Ground up

From a climate perspective, what immediate lessons can be drawn from the Covid-19 crisis and the resulting societal changes?

Patrizia Nanz: Even though we view the Covid-19 crisis as a fully international threat, one where we can see just how interconnected our whole planet is, for the first few months, the initial responses were primarily organized at the national level. However, some of the most successful responses have been those that have relied on the abilities of the relevant local and regional players to organize themselves, and on taking measures that are most appropriate to local situations. For instance, back in March, when governments moved to close the borders between European countries, the university hospitals in Karlsruhe and Freiburg in Germany began admitting patients from the Grand Est region of France, severely hit by the pandemic. Subsequently, in November 2020, the Grand Est government agreed to a mutual assistance pact with the German neighbouring regions of Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland-Palatinate and Saarland, to ultimately strengthen cross-border cooperation and coordination. This bilateral pact is a great example of a local solution being used to address a more global issue, simultaneously demonstrating the effectiveness of bottom-up responses.

Sébastien Treyer: The increasing awareness of how crucially interdependent we all are has reinforced the importance of protecting our global commons, with a strong emphasis on environmental issues. More importantly, it has raised the question of what needs to be done to truly engage a transition towards a greener economy while meeting the needs of our populations. The parallels with the 2008 economic crisis are

extremely relevant to me: back then, there was no clear quid pro quo regarding the state aids for the financial sectors, which severely deteriorated the relationship between citizens and their governments. As of now, it is not clear how long the Covid-19 crisis will last and, although people are gradually understanding the urgent need to protect the climate and biodiversity, they also require immediate support because of the current raft of business closures and bankruptcies. The daunting questions surrounding the greening of regional economies and the consequent changes to their labor markets remain paramount.

The measures that have been taken during the Covid-19 crisis were radical and rapid, but there was no real participative approach. Should the response to the climate emergency follow a similar model?

Sébastien Treyer The urgency of the situation imposes not to miss the deadlines that have been set. We have recently celebrated the fifth anniversary of the Paris Agreement and, for me, there has been a very positive acceleration in political decisions across the globe – from China, Japan, South Korea, the EU and soon, we hope, the United States – recently announcing that carbon neutrality is their long-term goal. But why can't we move faster? It is because of the need to make some extremely difficult trade-offs. In France, energy production is not the most problematic issue given the share of nuclear energy in electricity production, which is a relatively low emitter of greenhouse gases. Employment in the automotive industry, as well as personal and professional mobility, will cause major societal changes that will not happen overnight. It is the implementation and public acceptance of these changes that have not been properly prepared.

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Patrizia Nanz I am probably going to sound provocative, but as a scientist and researcher, I have been advising the German government and other European institutions for over a decade now. And during this time, I have seen very little change at either national or international levels. We have known about climate change for a long time now, so the problem is not a lack of knowledge. But so far, our understanding of global warming and the threats it poses have had little effect on our political, social and economic structures. The current steps being taken against Covid-19 are indeed quite radical. But I believe that synchronizing decentralized solutions would be much more effective and sustainable than a strictly hierarchical decision-making scheme in which the government makes decisions on climate in the expectation that society and associated systems such as the economy will follow and engage in sustainable transformation. Participation and self-organization are often perceived as a waste of time, but the reality is that we do benefit from both. After all, for a society to truly transform, the society itself must be the origin and motor of the transformation.

So, does their success depend on the public supporting these processes of transformation?

Patrizia Nanz We often think that there are only two possibilities: either we do what is necessary to safeguard the planet, going against the will of many citizens, or we follow the will of the citizens and renounce environmental measures. I think this is wrong, just as it is wrong to think that citizen participation is only a matter of having a consensus. As we saw with the Gilets Jaunes movement, what is at stake is the confidence citizens have in the effectiveness of policies. Politics must therefore take measures such as the Citizen's Convention on Climate in France – and their results – seriously, to solidify government-citizen proximity and dialogue. But it also means that the impact of the transformation depends on a transformation of public authorities. If the public administration and the political system, including the parliament, are not able to process and take up recommendations from their citizens then we are at a dead end.

Sébastien Treyer Polls are only one way of understanding what the people want; initiatives such as the Citizen's Convention on Climate are perhaps more effective as they allow the actual involvement and deliberation of citizens into the political decision-making process. While it can be argued that a sample of 150 individuals is not a representative group, it is striking how French citizens agree with Greta Thunberg and the IPCC in saying that we need change. They are convinced of the need to set high environmental goals. They proposed 149 measures because they believe a carbon tax will not suffice, as our system, the organization of our cities, the organization of our food and transport systems – all of it is blocked. According to them, if you want citizens and economic actors to take action solely through implementing carbon-taxes, there will be enormous inequalities and injustices as a result. So, it is important to propose 149 alternatives to a carbon tax because it is the rest that needs to be changed first. The work of citizens needs to be taken seriously.

Patrizia Nanz In my own experience, citizens are willing to take responsibility. Moreover, participation such as the Convention undermines populist movements because it is no longer a battle between «us,» the people, and «them,» the elites and government. We are all in the same boat, so we have to try and find solutions together.

What are the potential areas for short- and long-term cooperation, particularly between France and Germany?

Sébastien Treyer With respect to the European Green Deal, which aims towards a profound transformation of all EU economies, there are certain areas where France and Germany need to coordinate. With respect to the political agendas set by national governments, the issue of hydrogen is becoming crucial and needs to be addressed, even more so given the size of the German and French markets and the contrasting organizational models of their respective energy sectors. Duplication of investment must be avoided. Another important project is to de-intensify livestock farming, an issue of renewed urgency for a region like Brittany. The sharing of best practices with some German federal states

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facing similar challenges such as Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania would be interesting. We need to discuss the major political priorities of the Green Deal and, ultimately, use our geographical proximity and the dynamism of the Franco-German axis in order to strengthen European cooperation.

Patrizia Nanz Many countries would like Germany to take on more leadership in Europe, as expressed by President Macron in his Sorbonne speech of 2017. Emmanuel Macron wanted to put forward the idea of a European way, alongside Chancellor Angela Merkel, to transform and recreate Europe. With regards to what that might look like, it could mean climate measures being coupled with social measures, or a radically decentralized approach could be adopted involving regional powers. Indeed, it echoes the approach being taken by the French-German Forum for the Future. Building on the local capacity for innovation, its mission is to discover and understand successful transformational models in municipalities and regions and make recommendations to both the French and German government.

Sébastien Treyer Seen from France, we always have the impression that German subsidiarity and federalism mean that the territories are much better connected to national decision-making, whereas we, in France, would suffer from a very Jacobin way of decision-making from which we could not escape. Nowadays, though, France has some extremely well-designed regional experiments. We have set for ourselves a very ambitious medium to long-term objective: having regions with zero long-term unemployment, that are carbon-neutral, or even »energy-positive.« And we try to involve entire regions in achieving these goals, and in the process, so as to change the ways in which economic actors, civil society, the social and solidarity economy, and local communities interact.

How do you assess the chances of success for Europe's climate policy aims? Is the European Green Deal still a realistic goal?

Sébastien Treyer Perhaps surprisingly for some, Angela Merkel's and Emmanuel Macron's economic advisors still consider it to be feasible. However, even if

questions remain regarding the other two-thirds of the French recovery plan that are not directly targeted at the green transition, the ambition is still asserted today. Many important trade-offs will have to be made, and if the social situation in France worsens, it is possible that we may end up going in the wrong direction and seek to rescue the economy as it is, rather than rebuilding towards a new economy. For me, the battle is not won, but momentum is still very strong, and the message sent by China and the Biden administration, in particular, is that modernity will be carbon-neutral and digital. For that to happen, we need the recovery plans, which involve huge amounts of money being spent top-down, to be understood by the public. There is a need for transparency in the operationalization of these plans and how they will serve the collectively-defined purposes of society. Currently, we can't be certain that this will happen.

Patrizia Nanz The European Green Deal has an enormous potential. Even during a year that was significantly complexified by Covid-19, we saw the European Commission's awareness that any transformation requires citizen participation beyond the governmental level. The Covenant of Mayors and the Committee of the Regions showed that at the local level, there are plenty of ideas and a real willingness to change. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether the Climate Act launched in December 2020 will genuinely enable civil society to become more involved in climate action, or not. I am convinced that the European Green Deal can only succeed if the necessary transformations are initiated from the »bottom« and then taken up from the »top.« That is also key for supporting struggling regions on their way to develop and progress. Increased support from Brussels will never have the desired effect if the plans for using those funds are not worked out locally. We must therefore also ensure, in Europe as a whole, that the institutions are more open to experiments and solutions proposed by the municipalities, regions and citizens. Social and economic transformation will only truly begin with the opening up of the political processes, as well as the administrations themselves.

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The Series

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The Genshagen Forum for German-French Dialogue has been organized since 2010 in cooperation with the Institut Montaigne in Paris. In view of the numerous challenges Europe is facing, Germany and France must take on particular responsibility for the future of the EU and work on the development of joint strategies. The Genshagen Forum actively supports this process by fostering constructive dialogue and networking between young leaders from both countries. The participants come from the areas of politics and administration, business, science and media. They belong to the age group between 30 and 40 years and are personally invited on the basis of their expertise.

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