

Germany relaxes more virus rules, but with fallback clause

May 6 2020, by Frank Jordans and Geir Moulson



German Chancellor Angela Merkel attends a press conference in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, May 6, 2020 after an online meeting of Merkel and the German state governors on the loosening of the restrictions to reduce the spread of the new coronavirus. (AP Photo/Michael Sohn, pool)

German officials on Wednesday cleared the way for restaurants, hotels and remaining stores to reopen in the coming weeks, and for the country's soccer league to resume play. They also put in place a requirement for regions to reimpose restrictions if coronavirus infections rebound.

Germany, which began shutting down public life in mid-March, has seen the number of new cases fall sharply in recent weeks. It started loosening restrictions more than two weeks ago, when small shops were allowed to reopen. Other facilities, including hairdressers and zoos, have followed.

"We have a very, very good development of the figures for new infections, and that makes it possible for us to take further steps," Chancellor Angela Merkel said after consulting with the governors of Germany's 16 states.

German politicians have faced mounting pressure from businesses demanding a return to normality. But Merkel made clear there will be conditions attached to the latest decision, and that officials and citizens alike will need to act responsibly.

Regional authorities will have to draw up a plan to reimpose measures for any county that reports 50 new cases for every 100,000 inhabitants within a week. Those restrictions could be applied only to a facility such as a nursing home, if the outbreak is concentrated there, or to the whole area. The aim is to avoid reimposing a shutdown nationwide, Merkel said.

"We must take care that things don't slip out of our hands, and I have a good feeling because we agreed on this emergency mechanism today," she said. "We are not just saying what we are opening, but also that if something happens locally we won't wait until it has spread through the whole republic."

Under Germany's federal system, states are responsible for imposing and loosening lockdown measures. That has led to significant regional variations, with some governors less patient than others—and Wednesday's decision looks sure to strengthen that trend.

Large stores can now reopen everywhere. States will decide "in their own responsibility" on the step-by-step reopening of restaurants, which have been closed for all but takeouts, and hotels, which haven't been allowed to welcome tourists since March. They will have to seat customers further apart than usual and observe strict hygiene rules to prevent the virus spreading. Some regions want to start as early as Saturday.

Restaurants and hotels are the "most critical" sector for health reasons, Merkel said. With hotels reopening, "there will of course be more travel through the republic ... we will have to watch this process very, very closely."

While physical distancing rules will continue to apply and people will still have to wear face masks in shops and on public transport, Germany is now easing its rules on social contact. Since March 23, Germans have been allowed out in public only with one other person or with people they live with. They will now be allowed to meet more than one person from another household and be given more leeway to visit relatives, as Germany prepares to mark Mothers' Day on Sunday.

The country's top-tier soccer league, the Bundesliga, will be allowed to resume play starting in the second half of May, though with players being quarantined first and without spectators in stadiums.

States are being left to decide themselves on how and when to reopen theaters, cinemas, bars, clubs and other businesses, and how to open up creches for children before the summer. Students will continue to slowly return to school, the goal being that they see their teachers and

classmates at least once before the holidays.

Germany has reported more than 167,000 infections with the coronavirus, one of the world's highest numbers, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. But its death rate from COVID-19 has been far lower than that of comparable countries, with around 7,000 deaths recorded—attributed in part to wide testing early in the epidemic and a well-funded health system.

Merkel said it's up to Germans themselves to make sure their new freedoms work.

"I trust our citizens. Trust is the principle," Merkel said, dismissing the notion that local officials might under-report case numbers going forward to avoid going back into lockdown. "Of course you have to check occasionally, but if we don't have this trust that council leaders, mayors and health offices will work well, we might as well pack up and leave."

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