

“We Are Threatened By a Second Wave If We Don’t Act Very Quickly”

Merkel’s Chief of Staff on the Coronavirus.

Helge Braun, the head of Angela Merkel’s Chancellery, warns in an interview of a possible exponential rise in the number of coronavirus cases. He warns of the risk of long-term economic damage if Germany can’t keep the number of cases under control.



Helge Braun is the head of the German Chancellery - Foto: Andreas Chudowski / DER SPIEGEL

DER SPIEGEL: Mr. Braun, are we still in the beginning of the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic, or are we already in the middle of it?

Braun: We are currently seeing a widespread increase in infections, and we have experienced an extreme rise in large cities like Berlin and Bremen.

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DER SPIEGEL: What do you intend to do?

Braun: We still need a mix of different measures. Generally, though, we can say that the freedoms we had over the summer can't be fully maintained throughout autumn and winter. Overall, the caution among the populace needs to rise again. At the same time, we have to proceed with precision in individual hotspots and impose temporary restrictions, an approach we have had good experiences with so far. We are more concerned about the development in individual large cities where there is a diffuse infection pattern. We need determination.

DER SPIEGEL: Meaning?

Braun: In cities like Berlin, it's not about limiting or slowing down the increase. Rather, the goal has to be quite clear: to return to an incidence rate below 50 - meaning significantly less than 50 new infections per 100,000 inhabitants in a week.

DER SPIEGEL: Is the Berlin city-state government acting with enough urgency?

Braun: I have decided not to give individual grades. But every mayor and every city council of an affected city must work hard to bring about a reversal. It will take 10 days, anyway, before the measures show an effect, but then these figures really must go down. And that requires determination. Expanded mask obligations don't go far enough - there also have to be restrictions, particularly for celebrations and events, which are the most relevant driver of infections right now. A wedding in autumn 2020 cannot be a big wild celebration. It can be made up for next year.

DER SPIEGEL: Was our political leadership too careless? Did the summer create a false sense of security?

Braun: The development could not have been predicted in this way. When the travel season began, the numbers were low across the board. But this is what happened next: Our neighboring countries loosened things, even in places where the public health service isn't as effective as here. The numbers shot up there very quickly - and that led to a renewed increase in cases here. In August, 50 percent of our infections were due to people who had traveled abroad. This, of

course, created a bad starting point for the autumn.

DER SPIEGEL: You say that it couldn't have been foreseen, but any layman could have predicted such a thing.

Braun: Once again: The figures weren't just low in Germany - they were so low across all of Europe that there was simply no justification for prohibiting people from taking their summer holiday. Still, even then I was worried about the travel. It's no secret that mobility is a major factor in the spread of a disease like this.

DER SPIEGEL: Do summer vacations, parties and weddings mean that schools and daycare centers will have to be closed again?

Braun: There is no reason to see things in such sweeping terms as was necessary in the first half of the year when we knew so little about the virus. We should avoid that at all costs. Educational institutions should be the last things to close, not the first.

DER SPIEGEL: This interview is taking place in Berlin's Mitte district. If we wanted to travel from here, we wouldn't be allowed to stay overnight in Bavaria, but we could in Bremen, given that many states have banned hoteliers and operators of other tourist accommodation facilities from hosting people from Berlin. How are people supposed to understand that?

Braun: On Wednesday, I had a long discussion with the chiefs of staff of German state governors about which measures are the right ones. It was important to me that not everyone draws their own conclusions. The ultimate result is the tourist accommodation ban, which is the milder remedy relative to entry bans and quarantine orders. Some states were opposed even after much wrangling, but a completely uniform approach wasn't possible in this situation. We are all aware that it creates many problems.

DER SPIEGEL: Those wanting to travel despite the accommodation ban must present a negative coronavirus test result that is no older than 48 hours. Doesn't that mean that tourists will be taking test capacity away from patients who need it?

Braun: The states and the federal government are urging people in risk areas to avoid traveling this autumn if possible. It's clear, for example, that in Berlin

districts with a high caseload, there isn't enough capacity to allow all vacationers to take a test punctually before their departure. We have completely different priorities.

DER SPIEGEL: Where do those priorities lie?

Braun: Our focus right now is enabling people to continue working, keeping schools and training centers open, and keeping our health-care system functional. Everything else will have to take a back seat this autumn and winter. It won't be easy, that is clear to me.

DER SPIEGEL: What prospects can you offer?

Braun: The signals coming from vaccine research are very optimistic. There is hope that we can gradually normalize everyday life next year. Before that, we have to be careful to ensure the economy doesn't get into a situation like in the spring. It would be hit very hard and we would also have a great disadvantage compared with countries like China and South Korea, which have been very disciplined and are on the right track economically. You can see that positive economic developments and low infection rates go hand in hand.

DER SPIEGEL: But the economy also includes the tourism sector, in addition to things like catering, events, and culture. What about them?

Braun: These are the industries that are particularly affected at the moment. We have to help them through this difficult time with government support. It would be mistaken, however, to allow a kind of normality in those sectors that isn't possible at the moment. That would only lead to the entire economy grinding to a halt.

DER SPIEGEL: Is it still even possible to prevent a loss of control?

Braun: Yes. But we are threatened by a second wave if we don't act very quickly and very, very decisively now. This means that restrictions and rules also have to be enforced - through controls and heavy fines, for example. It's not a trivial offense if restaurant guests don't provide their contact details or enter made-up names and the health authorities then have to spend days trying to reconstruct infection chains that should actually be clear at a glance.

DER SPIEGEL: Does a curfew such as the one that has now been introduced in

Berlin, where bars, restaurants, and stores must be closed between 11 p.m. and 6 a.m., really make sense?

Braun: Yes. I think it is right and important. We all know from experience that people become more carefree the more alcohol is involved. That's why I think it's good to stop at a certain time of day.

DER SPIEGEL: Doesn't that drive people to places indoors where controls are no longer possible?

Braun: Basically, the most important thing in this crisis is the willingness of people to do their part and be careful. All I can do is appeal to each individual to not always think only about what is allowed and what is being checked, but rather to ask themselves: What can I do to protect myself most effectively? And how do I best help to prevent the spread of the disease and protect others who are at a higher risk of developing severe symptoms?

DER SPIEGEL: The president of the United States, who has himself been infected, says we shouldn't let the virus control our lives. And German virologist Hendrik Streeck has warned against over-dramatizing it. Are German politicians exaggerating?



Braun during his interview with DER SPIEGEL journalists Christoph Hickmann and Martin Knobbe at the Chancellery in Berlin: “I am very, very optimistic that we will have a vaccine next year.” - Foto: Andreas Chudowski / DER SPIEGEL

Braun: A look abroad explains everything. In countries that have lost control of the number of infections, the economy is also suffering dramatically. And at some point, the health care system gets overwhelmed. No country can say: We can handle it. Ultimately, tough restrictions will come anyway.

DER SPIEGEL: Virologist Streeck says that even the almost 20,000 new infections per day predicted by Chancellor Angela Merkel would be manageable because it's mostly younger people who are getting infected, for whom the symptoms are milder. Is he right?

Braun: Over the summer, it tended to be younger people who dared to go on vacation. Older people are much more cautious of their own accord and are less likely to become infected, which explains why we have so few serious cases at the

moment. But when the infection rates get very high, it becomes increasingly difficult to protect the most vulnerable groups. And it increases the risk of infection, in nursing homes, for example. The idea that we can control infections when they get to high levels is wrong. So, we have a choice: Either we keep it low and the health authorities can handle it. Or we lose control, and the virus spreads very rapidly through the population.

DER SPIEGEL: The concept of herd immunity, meaning as many as possible must get sick in order to then be immune from the coronavirus, is off the table?

Braun: To stop the virus in this way, more than half of all Germans would have to go through the infection. Even if you had a period of one and a half years for that to happen, 80,000 people would have to be infected every day. In that case, I don't think we would be able to say that our health-care system could easily cope with such a thing. If we had the feeling that it was hopeless anyway and that we would soon get a vaccine, then we could consider a different approach. But there is a real chance, and that's why we have to keep infection rates low over the winter.

DER SPIEGEL: What number is going to make you really nervous? At what point can the curve no longer be reversed?

Braun: There isn't a single number. What would be alarming is exponential growth because it would mean losing control of the chains of infection. We need to keep infections under control, meaning: We inform the contacts and send them into quarantine early enough that one person, at most, will infect one other person.

DER SPIEGEL: And if that's not successful, there isn't much else that can be done?

Braun: Then one person infects an average of three to five others and it goes up rapidly. That's why what we have seen in Berlin Mitte in recent days, namely exponential growth, is really alarming.

DER SPIEGEL: How certain are you that we can actually hope for a vaccine next spring? We've heard before that a vaccine might even be ready this autumn.

Braun: You can't promise anything. We can currently see that there are quite a

number of vaccines that are already being tested on humans and that they actually deliver immunity. There can always be setbacks with individual vaccines, and not all of them will be approved. But given that there are so many and that the first companies are entering into the approval process, I am very, very optimistic that we will have a vaccine next year.

DER SPIEGEL: But that's not the end of the story. At that point, as many as possible will need to be vaccinated.

Braun: Then it will certainly take several months before we get enough vaccine and administer it. We are already making logistical preparations, and we are addressing the question as to who should be vaccinated and when. We have commissioned the Standing Vaccination Commission at the Robert Koch Institute (*Germany's center for disease control*) to answer these questions at an early stage together with the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and the German Ethics Council.

DER SPIEGEL: So far, we have not seen higher than normal mortality through the coronavirus, so there haven't been more deaths than usual in Germany, despite the pandemic. Is the virus less lethal than initially thought?

Braun: No, I don't think so. Think of the images from the Heinsberg district (*Eds: the first region in Germany to get hit heavily by the coronavirus*) and the higher mortality rate at the time. In the meantime, our health-care system is doing exemplary work. In contrast to the beginning, we have comparatively fewer cases in retirement homes. And the elderly population is being extremely cautious. In addition, social distancing rules are also preventing all other autumnal infectious diseases from spreading rapidly.

DER SPIEGEL: You warned in an interview with DER SPIEGEL in March that the behavior of the population would be closely scrutinized. What is your appeal to Germans this fall?

Braun: I recall the chancellor's appeal at the end of her budget speech: It's up to all of us now. We cannot enjoy all the liberties this autumn and winter that we have enjoyed in other years. We have to be more careful. Then the world will look very different in the spring. And then there's the chance that Germany will emerge really well from this crisis.

DER SPIEGEL: But isn't it also possible that the coronavirus will be a crisis without end?

Braun: If we don't maintain discipline this autumn and the economy collapses again, we will continue to feel the economic effects for a very long time. If that happens, the crisis will have a very long and sad end. That would be a terrible pity.

DER SPIEGEL: Could air purifiers help us get through the winter better?

Braun: Yes, we have launched a 500 million program for the conversion of filter systems, because modern filter systems in particular rely heavily on recirculated air. This can be very favorable for energy savings, but not so favorable for fighting viruses.

DER SPIEGEL: What about mass testing for the coronavirus?

Braun: Simply conducting blind testing doesn't make sense in many places. There will now be rapid tests, but you also need medical personnel for them. And they carry a different meaning. They can determine if I am acutely contagious, but they can't tell us if someone is infected and will only become contagious afterward. And even there, the capacities also won't be unlimited this winter. That's why they need to be prioritized for use in the health-care sector and in schools and daycare centers.

DER SPIEGEL: Do you wish you could go back to March, when the state governors were still making decisions in tandem with you and the chancellor? That's no longer the case.

Braun: It is a constant struggle to find uniform standards. Not everything has to be the same, but it does need to be comparable. And we are still managing that for the most part.

DER SPIEGEL: Mr. Braun, we thank you for this interview.

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