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Germany: a successful start for the Corona-Warn-App

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On 16th June Germany launched the Corona-Warn-App which allows the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic to be tracked by registering contacts between users. The application is equipped with a function to assess the degree of the risk of infection, based on the time spent with an infected person, the distance from that person and the number of days which have passed since the meeting. The Corona-Warn-App identifies all phone devices which have been a small distance away from the phone of the infected person on the condition that both phones have the application. The data is collected by means of wireless Bluetooth short-distance connection technology (not GPS) and is not transferred or stored on a central server; state institutions do not have access to it. The application has been developed by the German companies Deutsche Telekom and SAP with the support of the Robert Koch Institute and Fraunhofer Society for the Advancement of Applied Research. It cost 20 million euros to develop and the German Federal Ministry of Finance estimates the overall cost of servicing it by the end of 2021 will amount to 49 million euros.

Commentary

- The fact that 12.2 million people (15% of German society) have downloaded the application in its first week of operation is a very good result, given that before the launch of the Corona-Warn-App a majority of the respondents (46% versus 42% in a survey conducted for the ZDF television channel in mid-June) declared they would not use the application. According to scientists from Oxford University, at least 15% of society is needed to ensure the effectiveness of the application and it would reach its optimum performance when 60% of citizens started using it.
- A two-month delay in finalising the launch of the application has come under fire. Due to the delay, the Corona-Warn-App will mainly be useful in preparing Germany for a second wave of the pandemic. At present, the growth of the number of infections has been substantially limited and an increase in the number of diagnosed cases results from local hotspots of the disease (e.g. Gütersloh district, Göttingen and Berlin-Neukölln). The Green Party and the parliamentary grouping of the Left have also put forward reservations regarding the lack of a separate legal framework for regulating the operation of the application. They fear, above all, that it will be possible for employers to force employees to download the application on company phones and that the protection of personal data is not sufficient. Ensuring adequate data protection, which is crucial in German society, has been the government's priority since the very beginning and it has

pushed the government to change the strategy for the development of the application – from a central system in which the data is stored on a much larger scale to a decentralised model.

- The earlier discussion on distance learning reverberated during the launch of the Corona-Warn-App, which has intensified the ongoing debate in Germany about the digital divide in society. The application is not compatible with approximately 15-20% of the oldest devices, most often used by seniors. Reaching out to people who do not use the internet also present a problem; research carried out by the German non-profit Initiative D21 indicates that this refers to approximately 11% of citizens. Germany will try to avoid this exclusion of a section of German society from the use of the tools to contain the pandemic by conducting systematic preventative testing in schools and testing all people being admitted to hospitals and nursing homes. In the debate about the issue there have been suggestions that the application should be complemented by adding tokens equipped with Bluetooth technology. They would be independent from smartphones but perform the same functions as the smartphone application.