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**DEMOCRATISING  
DEMOCRACY  
NO TRANSFORMATION  
WITHOUT DEMOCRATISATION**

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## DEMOCRATISING DEMOCRACY

### NO TRANSFORMATION WITHOUT DEMOCRATISATION

“My children will be better off than myself one day.” The strong belief in progress expressed in this statement has been holding liberal democracies together for the past decades. Today, more and more people perceive the future no longer as a promise but as a threat. They feel a sense of powerlessness in the face of climate change, cultural backlashes, and economic transformation. Some are overwhelmed by the complexity and speed of these developments. Others are scared because, in their view, the necessary transformations are not happening fast enough. We are witnessing a simultaneity of pressure for change and longing for continuity and it is unclear which of the forces will prevail. Societies in liberal democracies are realising what they have already known for a long time: Progress is not linear. The future is open.

This is not necessarily bad news. In fact, if the future were not open, there would be no room for individual freedom. However, if the future were entirely open and not predictable at all, we would drown in uncertainty and fear. The critical task of democracies is to allow for control over the future without closing it and to open up the future without making it uncontrollable – to strike a balance between openness and order.

In practice, however, the envisaged equilibrium of openness and order seems to be out of balance. In light of the increasing pressure to transform from fossil fuel-based to carbon-neutral societies, the future seems ever more open and at the same time ever less controllable through the framework of national democracies. The radical change needed requires strong legitimation through democratic processes. In other words, for the 2020s to become a decade of transformation, it also needs to become a decade of democratisation.

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By protecting while also setting the limits of individual freedom and determining the processes of collective decision-making, liberal democracy sets a frame in which change is possible and can be shaped freely and equally by all, but in which complete chaos is unlikely. According to political scientist Adam Przeworski, democracy is institutionalised uncertainty – and institutionalised freedom, one could add.

At Innocracy 2021, we want to identify fields that are excluded or being removed from democratic control and explore how (re-)democratising them could lead to a better future. How can we develop democracies further to allow people a free and equal say in one of the most essential questions in society: what should our future look like?

## WHAT IS DEMOCRATISATION?

Before we take a closer look at fields and ways in which our democracies can be developed further, it is necessary to clarify what exactly we mean by democratisation. Democracy is never a final state but always an ongoing process. In this spirit, we can read the history of democracy as a history of inclusion and expansion. The labour movements of the 19th century, the suffragettes of the early 20th century, and the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s did not only push for their inclusion in the democratic decision-making process but also expanded the scope of democratically governed social systems. These milestones of democratic history remind us that it makes much more sense to think of democracy not only as an achieved state we must defend but also, and more importantly, as a process we must collectively develop: to think of democracy as democratisation.

However, we would be mistaken if we conceived of democratisation as a linear development. Democracy can fundamentally change its form, it can backslide, and it can also fully dissolve. A citizen from ancient Greece would probably have difficulties calling the form of representative systems we know democratic; examples of democratic backsliding can be found in almost any Western state of today; the cases of Turkey and Peru show that fairly consolidated democracies can be slowly disintegrated or abruptly overthrown. Processes of democratisation and de-democratisation can take different forms and they can run in parallel.

In public discourse, there is a tendency to equate democratisation with opening access to systems formerly closed. In this understanding, the internet democratised knowledge and social media democratised the public sphere: with the invention of the internet, many more people can create and consume knowledge and with the emergence of social media, everybody with a social media account can potentially shape public discourse. However, while users do have open access to social media, they do not, to a large part, have access to the rules that govern social media platforms.

If we understand democracy as an institutionalised process in which free and equal citizens generate rules and decisions that are binding for all, democratisation is not the act of opening up access to a certain system itself but opening up free and equal access to the rulemaking process that governs that particular system. Democratisation, then, is the process of including more people into democratic decision-making processes in

more innovative and impactful forms and of expanding these processes to areas that are currently not under (sufficient) democratic control.

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## INCLUSION AND EXPANSION: MAKING THE 2020S A DECADE OF DEMOCRATISATION

What does democratising our democracies mean in practice? What are the main deficits of our current democracies and how could we go about addressing them? Our aim cannot be to answer these questions comprehensively, let alone, conclusively, but to provide a schematic overview of what it takes to make the 2020s a decade of democratisation.

### **INCLUSION: IF YOU ARE NOT AT THE TABLE, YOU ARE ON THE MENU**

Political equality is a crucial promise of democracy. For individuals to live in freedom, there has to be a congruence between those who are ruling and those who are being ruled. All those subjected to binding rules and decisions should have an equal say in the processes that lead to those rules and decisions. Yet, in all liberal democracies, the rich and privileged are far more likely to participate in democratic processes than the poor and marginalised. Even in the act of voting – the most basic and arguably most important form of democratic participation – these inequalities become particularly visible. Just to give one striking example: In the recent federal elections in Germany, about ten million people

who are subjected to the election result were not eligible to vote as they have no German citizenship. Moreover, among the 15 million who did not make use of their right to vote, the vast majority has a low socioeconomic status. One central goal of a democratisation agenda has to be to open access to (dual) citizenship and to break the downward spiral between social and political inequality in order to close the participation gap.

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Not only do poor and marginalised groups participate less, the participation gap is also mirrored in a representation gap. Women, migrants, and workers are still massively underrepresented in parliaments of liberal democracies throughout the world. To be clear, the idea of democratic representation is not to provide a descriptive reflection of all random societal characteristics. If 20% of the population are left-handed, the parliament does not need to reserve 20% of the seats for left-handers. However, if structural inequalities lead to the exclusion of certain groups, their perspectives, and interests, this poses a serious problem with regard to the input and output legitimacy of democracies. While in theory, men are perfectly capable of representing the interests of women, the past has clearly shown that, overall, in practice, they tend to neglect female perspectives and interests. And even if this were not the case, it is an imperative of the idea of political equality that gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, and class must not lower one's chances to become a representative.

Addressing the participation and representation gap requires bottom-up and top-down approaches. Regarding the latter, a critical question democratic parties have to find answers to is how they can overcome structural barriers for underrepresented groups to play a bigger role in their parties and factions. Regarding the former, civil society and political parties share a responsibility to mobilise marginalised groups, to dissolve the legal, cultural, and material barriers that hinder political equality, and to create innovative formats of political participation.

## EXPANSION: POWER TO THE PARLIAMENTS

We often think of improving democracy in terms of widening and deepening the possibilities of participation. While the question of who is able to participate in democratic decision-making processes is crucial, it should not divert our attention from the equally important question of what it is that we (do not) democratically decide about.

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Over the last decades, trends of privatisation, internationalisation, constitutionalisation, and power shifts in favour of the executive branch have massively decreased the influence of parliaments and the scope and depth of democratic control. A political system in which everybody can participate in democratic processes equally but where crucial decisions are taken outside these processes does not live up to the democratic ideal of a future shaped equally and freely by all.

One of the core tasks in democratising our democracies will be to reverse the power shift from majoritarian institutions (MI) such as parties and parliaments towards non-majoritarian institutions (NMIs) such as central banks, constitutional courts and international institutions. This is not to say that non-majoritarian institutions are not democratic. By checking and balancing the legislative branch, they do serve an important role in the architecture of liberal democracies. However, parliaments – be it on the local, regional, national level or beyond – are the main institutions through which citizens can assert democratic control, they are the embodiment of popular government. The massive transformations ahead will only be met with acceptance, let alone enthusiasm, if fundamental decisions are taken by institutions with high levels of democratic legitimacy and proximity to citizens – even and especially when in a crisis and time is short.

Simply put, there are two options to address the politicisation of NMIs and the decreasing influence of MIs. One is to democratise powerful non-majoritarian institutions such as central banks, the other is to empower democratic majoritarian institutions such as the European and national parliaments. The central question that democracies need to answer here is how to increase democratic control over spheres that currently lack order, such as the digital space and global financial markets.

## INNOCRACY 2021: DEMOCRATISING DEMOCRACY

We believe that for the 2020s to become a decade of transformation, it also has to become a decade of democratisation. In the years to come, the way we produce, work, and live will fundamentally change. It is up to us whether these transformations will be characterised by design – in the sense of change brought about by technocratic institutions and corporations –, disaster – in the sense of uncontrolled change due to inaction –, or democracy – in the sense of change shaped equally and freely by all.

At Innocracy 2021, representatives from politics, civil society, academia, media, and arts and culture from all across Europe will come together to address issues of democratisation along three dimensions.

**WHY:** Why should we further democratise our political systems and societies? What are the potentials of democratisation, what are its limits?

**WHAT:** What aspects of our political systems need to be democratised (institutions, policy fields, decision-making processes)? What spheres of life do we want to democratise beyond the political (workplaces, schools, cultural institutions)?

**WHO:** Who can participate in democratic processes and who cannot? How can we tackle inequalities in political power and democratic control?

Over the past years, a lot of energy has been put into fighting off anti-democratic forces. And rightly so: the rise of authoritarianism within and outside the Western world is putting democracies under tremendous pressure. However, a sole mode of defense might lead us to only think about what democracy is and has been and to lose sight of what it could and needs to become. At Innocracy 2021, we want to move from liberal democracy as a state we must defend to democratisation as a process we must develop – because to stabilise democracy is to improve it.

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**Paul Jürgensen** is Project Manager in the programme “Future of Democracy” at Das Progressive Zentrum. He oversees projects on representation and participation, democratic innovations and visions, and dealing with right-wing populism and extremism. Prior to this position, he completed the trainee programme at Das Progressive Zentrum. He is co-author of the book „Schleichend an die Macht“ (Dietz Verlag, 2020) and the study „Brücken bauen für die Demokratie“ (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2020).



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Das Progressive Zentrum is an independent, non-profit think tank founded in 2007, devoted to establishing new networks of progressive actors from different backgrounds and promoting active and effective policies for economic and social progress. It involves especially next generation German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programmes Future of Democracy, Economic and Social Transformation and International Dialogue, with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organisation is based in Berlin and also operates in many European countries as well as in the United States.

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## **INNOCRACY**

Over the past five years, Das Progressive Zentrum has established Innocracy as one of the largest conferences on democratic innovation and transformation in Europe. During that time, the think tank connected with a variety of people and organisations working on the future of democracy from all across Europe. Together, the participants have managed to develop a better understanding of the challenges liberal democracies are facing today and the ways to overcome them. Our consensus: It takes both incremental change through democratic innovation and fundamental transformations through radical reform. But most importantly, politics in liberal democracies need direction – a democratic debate about clear and bold ideas of what our future societies should look like. Under the title “Democratising Democracy” Innocracy 2021 provides a platform for exploring ways of democratising our democracies.

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