



SHAPING PROGRESS

**PROVIDING NEW IMPULSES FOR
LIBERAL AND SOCIAL DEMOCRACY**

OVERVIEW

Thinking ahead.

INTRODUCTION	4
1. STARTING-POINT: A CHANGING WORLD – A WORLD OUT OF JOINT	5
The global anti-liberal populist wave	5
Can Germany serve as an anchor of stability?	7
The (supposedly) excessive demands on our liberal societies	8
2. WHAT PROGRESSIVE POLITICS STANDS FOR IN TIMES OF CHANGE	9
Six central questions of progressive politics	11
The role of the nation-state in a changing world	12
Being progressive is (also) a question of attitude	13
3. THE CONTRIBUTION OF A THINK TANK LIKE DAS PROGRESSIVE ZENTRUM	14
Das Progressive Zentrum understands itself as a platform and a node within a dynamic network	16
ABOUT THE PAPER & DAS PROGRESSIVE ZENTRUM	18
IMPRINT	18

1 STARTING-POINT: A CHANGING WORLD – A WORLD OUT OF JOINT



This reflection and discussion paper has several objectives. On the one hand, it serves to take the current temperature of progressive politics. It sketches the topics and basic questions that progressives need to focus on in an increasingly disjointed world. In addition, it outlines what we understand by “progress” under present conditions. On the other hand, the paper is intended to sharpen our profile as a think tank and political network.

We want to make clear what we stand for – and do not stand for – as progressives in Germany and Europe. And with this paper we would like to invite our partner organisations and our fellow campaigners to discuss what joint contributions we can make to strengthening our liberal democracy – for a modern social society in which all members have a share in progress.

We are living in politically turbulent times marked by dramatic change. Globally active technology companies seem to be digitalising, networking and transforming the world from top to bottom at breathtaking speed. While there has been an overall decrease in inequality between countries on a global scale, social inequality is increasing rapidly in almost all societies, including the OECD countries. In recent years, we have witnessed high levels of political uncertainty and disorientation – driven in no small part by populist parties and politicians. This was accompanied by a loss in importance of classical democratic institutions such as political parties and trade unions and the rise of right-wing populism (and in some countries also of left-wing populism).

Ultimately, we now find ourselves in a policy cycle in which new cleavages are forming between social structures: socio-economic conflicts (social justice vs. the market) have receded into the background, while socio-cultural conflicts over more or less cosmopolitanism and social diversity are coming to the fore. The political agenda is now dominated by the cleavage between the open and the closed society, between liberal and anti-liberal, and between liberal and authoritarian political programmes. These developments have contributed to the recent strong tailwind enjoyed by the proponents of anti-liberal social models in Europe and across the world. We must oppose this development with progressive ideas and policies that can provide orientation and inspire hope.

THE GLOBAL ANTI-LIBERAL POPULIST WAVE

Although these overarching trends are global in character, they exhibit specific national manifestations in different countries. In some countries, political forces that represent emotional and often radically ethnic and nativist political ideas fuelled by resentment have already acquired parliamentary majorities and government power. They represent different forms of new anti-liberal and authoritarian rule – such as, for example, in China, Russia, Hungary, Poland and Turkey, as well as in Brazil (since the recent change in regime) – and recently also at least to some degree in the United States and in Austria and Italy.

The governments of these countries question the value of freedom and the achievements of liberal democracy in principle. They propagate a self-defined majority principle and when it suits them negate minority rights. The resulting political changes are giving rise to economic, social and cultural upheavals in the societies in question, but also in international relations. The populists also dispute the need for a responsible and principled international policy (including climate policy). Thus, these anti-liberal forces are combating central democratic and progressive values such as pluralism and equality, diversity and solidarity.

“If the anti-liberal concept of society continues its global spread, the model of social and liberal democracy will find itself once again in a competitive struggle between systems for the first time since the collapse of communism.”

If the anti-liberal concept of society continues its global spread, the model of social and liberal democracy will find itself once again in a competitive struggle between systems for the first time since the collapse of communism, a struggle that can lead to a clash of systems. For the present, the social and liberal forces in the societies of Europe and the Western world still seem to represent a clear majority. However, they are visibly shaken by the anti-liberal, authoritarian wave roiling many societies and for the time being remain astoundingly defensive.

In many European countries, such as France, Great Britain, Germany and the Nordic countries, a radical, system-changing accession to power by anti-liberal political forces (still) seems to be a long way off. But here, too, tectonic shifts in social discourse are already discernible, with far-reaching effects on the formation of opinion and policy-making. Right-wing populist figures of argumentation are increasingly often finding resonance among the social mainstream. One of the main reasons for this is that even centre-right and centre-left political actors are adopting strategies of the right-wing populists. For want of independent and forward-looking concepts of their own, they simply adapt the content and language of backward-looking positions, which as a result are becoming “normalized” in the democratic debate and are able to exercise far-reaching socio-political effects.

Social discourse is taking an enduring turn for the worse towards a polarization and at times a new “brutalization” of democratic manners. Evidently, the progressive and liberal forces have not managed to provide a sufficiently positive, decisive and at the same time attractive response to these reactionary competitors for sovereignty over socio-political interpretations.

These far-reaching political and socio-economic changes are accompanied by a momentous structural transformation of the public sphere and the communications landscape. For many years now, communication within a broad public arena has ceased to be the privilege of the mass media or the state. The Internet is making it easier for individuals to access information, thereby strengthening their position of power vis-à-vis the state. At the same time, citizens have new opportunities to spread their own messages quickly and effectively outside the context of fixed communication structures. If right-wing populist movements were not so professional in how they use the social media, they probably would not have achieved their current impact in the public perception. But behind their rise are also structural changes in the everyday lives of people whose traditional habits are being disrupted and challenged. The acceleration of social life and ubiquitous economisation are leading to a growing need on the part of many citizens and social groups to stabilize or reconfigure long-established identities.

CAN GERMANY SERVE AS AN ANCHOR OF STABILITY?

Germany in particular, which was long considered a haven of relative stability, is facing major changes and challenges. Central democratic stability anchors such as the rule of law, the media, trade unions, associations and especially the large popular parties seem to be less resilient than expected – also because they have been slow to actively embrace the new communicative challenges and use them to their advantage. Here in Germany, backward-looking nationalist-populist forces are also fomenting fears, relativising Germany’s historical responsibility and deliberately spreading resentment against foreigners, vulnerable groups and minorities. Existing democratic institutions and the politicians who defend them find themselves exposed to unscrupulous attacks and there has been an increase in aggression against a critical public and against science. Most ominously, the disdain for democratic politics as well as its actors and institutions has at times reached levels reminiscent of the Weimar Republic. While this is understandable given that politics has in fact had little success in including and winning over all sectors of the population, the disparaging rhetoric of right-wing populists (“old parties”, “system parties”, “establishment”, etc.) has become so pervasive that it could pave the way for a repudiation of representative democracy.

“The current political debate in Germany is not dominated by socio-economic issues but by cultural challenges and irritations.”

To all appearances, the current political debate in Germany is not dominated by socio-economic issues but by **cultural challenges** and irritations. This is shown above all by the acrimonious dispute over German refugee and integration policy, which runs right through (almost) all of the mainstream parties. At the same time, however, it would be a mistake to ignore the impact of structural changes in the economy and society. For example, **multinational corporations** have become so powerful that any politics that does not rise to the challenge of establishing new requirements for transparency and regulation (including taxation instruments such as the digital tax) is bound to appear untrustworthy. Progressives must therefore engage more intensively than before with the abuses, conflicting goals and contradictions of globalisation, Europeanisation and digitalisation – with the specific goal of preserving the positive core of these processes and being in a position to develop them further in constructive directions. This is especially true when it comes to deepening European integration.

“Progressives must engage more intensively with the abuses, conflicting goals and contradictions of globalisation, Europeanisation and digitalisation.”

THE (SUPPOSEDLY) EXCESSIVE DEMANDS ON OUR LIBERAL SOCIETIES

The challenges outlined above favour a social constellation in which traditional political organisations and certainties are being placed in question. The classical contrast between “Right” and “Left” seems to be dissolving. Individuals and personalised movements, rather than political parties, are meeting with growing support among the population and there is an unmistakable **trend towards autocratic styles of leadership**. On the other hand, the formation of new progressive orientations in society, in the parties and within the party system is progressing only sluggishly. It is particularly striking how hard the German and European organisations, institutions and social milieus that originated in the social conflicts of the 19th and 20th centuries are finding it to respond positively, proactively and combatively to the current challenges.

The breakdown of trust between the dominant actors within the political system, on the one hand, and civil society, on the other, is providing fertile soil for populism to flourish. Given the political disorientation and indecisiveness of the major popular parties as regards both interests and ideas, there is an increasing danger that populist actors will become a permanent force and attract even more support. It has been apparent for some years that a **pervasive defensive mood** against the (supposedly) excessive demands being placed on our societies in the 21st century is spreading in certain parts of Europe. Support for the solidarity-based social welfare systems is also declining and politicians from the traditional parties are responding increasingly often by retreating to defensive national positions, resulting in a dangerous vicious circle.

“Progressive parties and actors have until now failed to develop viable concepts for linking the national with the supranational level in such a way that citizens feel the benefits.”

In fact, even **progressive parties and actors** have until now failed to develop truly viable concepts for linking the national with the supranational level in such a way that citizens can feel and understand the benefits of this policy. What is at stake in concrete terms are the numerous problems that urgently need attention in economic, technological, energy, climate, mobility, social and immigration policy – and even more so the unresolved questions concerning the future role of the nation-state and European integration. But also with regard to the continuous increase in social inequality, too few convincing answers have been formulated in recent years. **Substantive debates over how to address inequality and promote the fair participation** of all in prosperity are urgently needed, but they have yet to take place. The same can be said about the cluster of issues surrounding climate and environmental policy which has been forced to the margins of political debate even though there is extraordinary pressure to act – also in view of the economic and social upheavals to be expected if we fail to act.

2 WHAT PROGRESSIVE POLITICS STANDS FOR IN TIMES OF CHANGE

By “progressive” we understand a political course that is liberal and at the same time social. Under the changed conditions described above, this course undertakes to develop and politically organise a **reciprocal positive relationship between economic, social and environmental progress**, instead of playing the goals of economic dynamism, justice and environmental protection – or even socially or ethnically defined groups – off against each other. **The measure and goal of all progressive policies** should be the improvement of real life chances, that is, the expansion of people’s actual freedoms and “capabilities” (Amartya Sen). This is the essential political idea on which progressive politics is founded.

“The measure and goal of all progressive policies should be the improvement of real life chances, the expansion of people’s actual freedoms and capabilities.”

Progressives have recognised that a changing world cannot be pacified by persisting with a policy of maintaining the status quo. From a progressive perspective, therefore, it cannot be a matter of defending the existing order for its own sake. Rather, it is a question of first understanding change and then moving proactively to lend it a progressive direction. This is the **key to any new progressive politics** for our time.

The central challenges that progressive thought and action must confront on the path to progress are the **contradictions of modern societies** and the associated threats to democracy and social cohesion. Most prominent among these threats are extremism, populism and technocracy. How can the universally deplored alienation of citizens from political parties and their elected representatives be explained? And what should be done about it? What are promising strategies for combating social inequality and exclusion? How must politics react to the social unease concerning economic and cultural change and shifting values discussed under the heading of “identity politics”? How is it even possible to engage in evidence-based politics at a time when truth(s) and scientific authority are being eroded?

In addition to responses to challenges to democratic politics, we also need progressive approaches to **modernising economic structures** in a world in the throes of digitalisation, demographic change, migration and climate change: how can scientific and technological progress be shaped and realised for the benefit of all? Where is decisive regulatory intervention needed to minimise environmental and climate upheavals, even in the face of resolute resistance by established economic actors?

“Right-wing populist, anti-liberal and inhumane tendencies must meet with firm opposition from progressives in all public arenas.”

The answers we give to these questions will be decisive for upholding democracy and the social market economy – as a political principle and a liberal model of life – and for their further development. The rise of the new **right-wing populism** poses a challenge that will absorb much of the energy of the parties and civil society in the medium term. Right-wing populist, anti-liberal and inhumane tendencies must meet with firm opposition from progressives in all public arenas, in intellectual and journalistic debates, but also in parliamentary debates and controversies within civil society. Simply adopting a defensive posture does not go far enough. Rather, arguments for progressive goals with new ideas and narratives, as well as a fresh, inclusive and at the same time combative language must be presented in public discourse.

“We advocate a politics of life chances for all.”

It is therefore more necessary than ever to vigorously promote **progressive discourses** in Germany and Europe, while also demonstrating a more innovative spirit. This is why we advocate to systematically strengthen the positive reciprocal relation between a fair economy and a society based on solidarity and developing a new **politics of life chances for all**. It is clear in this context that, in the future as well, economic success and a society that is generally

regarded as just cannot be achieved without conflicts. But instead of playing off efficiency, environmental and justice objectives against each other, it is primarily a matter of developing **win-win constellations** in which efficiency, justice and environmental reason reinforce each other. Not least the success of the Scandinavian countries as societies combining economic dynamism with modern welfare states proves that this symbiotic positive sum game is feasible and represents a viable future.

More so than at any other time in history, enabling people to participate successfully in dynamic market processes, and thereby to contribute to social value creation, has preconditions that cannot be guaranteed by the market itself – for example, ensuring sufficient levels of education and life chances and sustainable environmental conditions. However, in the 21st century these preconditions can no longer be created by the nation-state alone. In the case of Germany and its partner countries, the nation-state will acquire full sovereignty only through deeper integration of the European Union.

SIX GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR PROGRESSIVE POLITICS

- 1 What are the reasons for the new alienation of citizens from the established parties and how can they be overcome?
- 2 What are promising strategies for combating social inequality and exclusion?
- 3 How can scientific and technological progress be shaped in the interests of all?
- 4 How can evidence-based politics be pursued at a time when truth(s) and scientific authority are being eroded?
- 5 How can the state and Europe become symbols of progress and sustainability once again?
- 6 How can Europe provide even better protection against the negative effects of globalisation while at the same time serving as a guarantor of liberal and progressive values?



THE ROLE OF THE NATION-STATE IN A CHANGING WORLD

National and European politics must change and in the process create linkages between **national and supranational levels**. For it is clear that the negative impacts of globalisation have become the fuel driving populist movements that want to reverse not only globalisation but also Europeanisation. Populists are once again acclaiming the nation-state as a remedy and are propagating closed societies and national isolation. This narrowly conceived path of retreat is also reflected in the policies of governments and political parties and in the discourses of certain groups of intellectuals.

“The negative impacts of globalisation have become the fuel driving populist movements.”

What also finds expression here is the widespread feeling that nation-states represent the most important level for a majority of the population in virtue of their function in ensuring protection, distribution and participation. In this respect, it must be acknowledged that the **nation-state** and its role in ensuring the rule of law and social security are not antiquated remnants, but provide the foundation for future Europeanisation and globalisation policies that must be further developed. This applies at least to Germany and to all European partner countries in which the state is still more a solution than a problem.

And even though European unification has not (yet) lived up to many progressive expectations, it is also true that global challenges are complex and cannot be met by national governments on their own. A division and communitarianisation

of responsibility, especially at European level, is and remains unavoidable for Germany, particularly in view of the need for collective action in areas such as security, innovation, industrial location and climate policy. **Europe is the most important force for regulating globalisation.**

“The prospects of a progressive future depend crucially on a modern and effective state and a modern and effective Europe.”

Thus the prospects of a progressive future ultimately depend crucially on a **modern and effective state** and a modern and effective Europe, which, in cooperation with an active civil society open to innovation, can use its potentials and structures to promote the common good. Against this background, the question that should guide progressive politics is: How can politics and the state restore confidence and thereby become genuine vectors of progress and sustainability? And how can Europe become a bulwark against the negative impacts of globalisation and at the same time a guarantor of liberal and progressive values? This includes the courage and the ability to exercise more effective control over globally operating (and especially digital) corporations and emissions-intensive, polluting industries.

BEING PROGRESSIVE IS (ALSO) A QUESTION OF ATTITUDE

Progressive politics must provide answers to these questions and challenges. A distinguishing feature of progressive forces in this regard is their **committed attitude**. Progressives are curious; they embrace change and constructive action and are willing to assume responsibility. The renewal of our liberal democracy in the direction of a modern and just society cannot succeed if we adopt a defensive posture in discourse and action. What a politics of social reform and transformation calls for is instead self-confidence and an upbeat, forward-looking and hands-on attitude. Wild actionism is alien to the progressive attitude. What it requires is in the first place the critical and honest analysis of socio-political conditions. Therefore, it is a matter of seeing and articulating how things are in order to improve the status quo. The hallmarks of a progressive attitude are pronounced optimism and enlightened commitment to political action. The ability to work towards progressive renewal of a liberal and social order beyond traditional ideologies and new forms of populism first emerges from the interplay between a critical gaze and energetic commitment.

“The hallmarks of a progressive attitude are pronounced optimism and enlightened commitment to political action.”

Progressive politics seeks to improve the conditions for individuals to act responsibly in order to promote a society of free and equal persons, but also a spirit of solidarity. At the same time, it is a matter of fostering a **strong civil society**, without which democratic politics and good

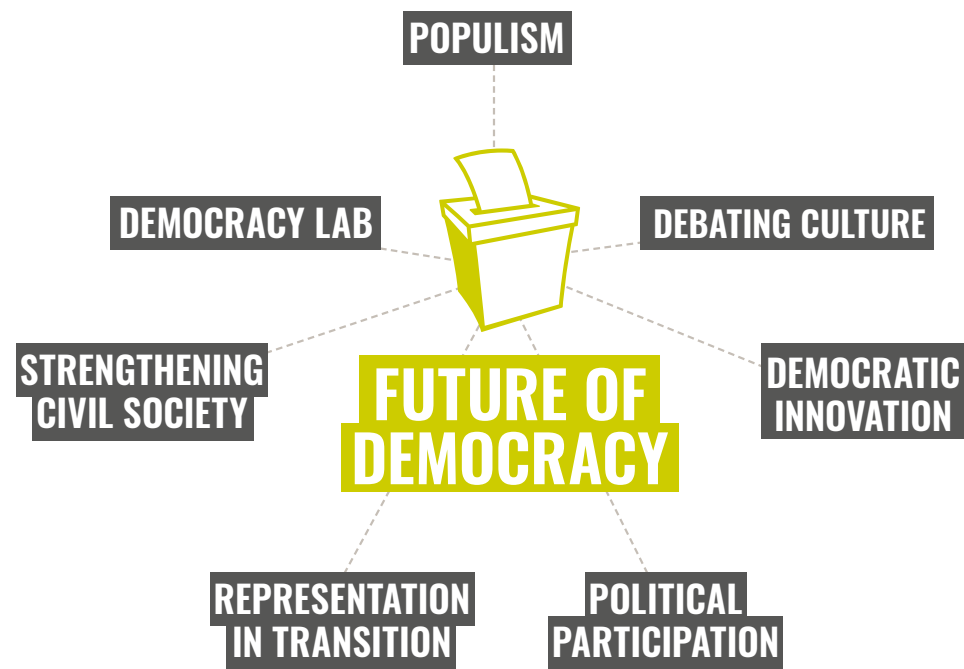
governance would lack a foundation and the urgently needed corrective forces. The democratic civil society actors and independent institutions should serve as bulwarks to limit the influence of markets and the state to a reasonable level compatible with political self-determination.

Progressives are united by their **belief in the changeability** of this human-made world, in social progress and in the effectiveness of our actions. They have confidence in the values, principles and institutions of an enlightened politics. However, their task is to examine more closely, to question more patiently and to study more intensively the causes of undesirable developments and to underscore more passionately the achievements and potentials of democracy, the rule of law and the welfare state – and to advocate them actively in political debates. At the same time, progressives must be open to new democratic, social and environmental answers that provide more effective responses to current challenges than in the past. The **ethical maxim of progressive forces** takes its orientation from the idea of individual empowerment and communal solidarity, with the goal of promoting the opportunities for realisation of as many people as possible. To this end, the existing social and political structures must be measured by their ability to develop solutions for remedying the social and ecological deficits in the economy and society. In particular, progressives must be able to present a path to a better future to those who are suffering under the existing social and economic conditions.

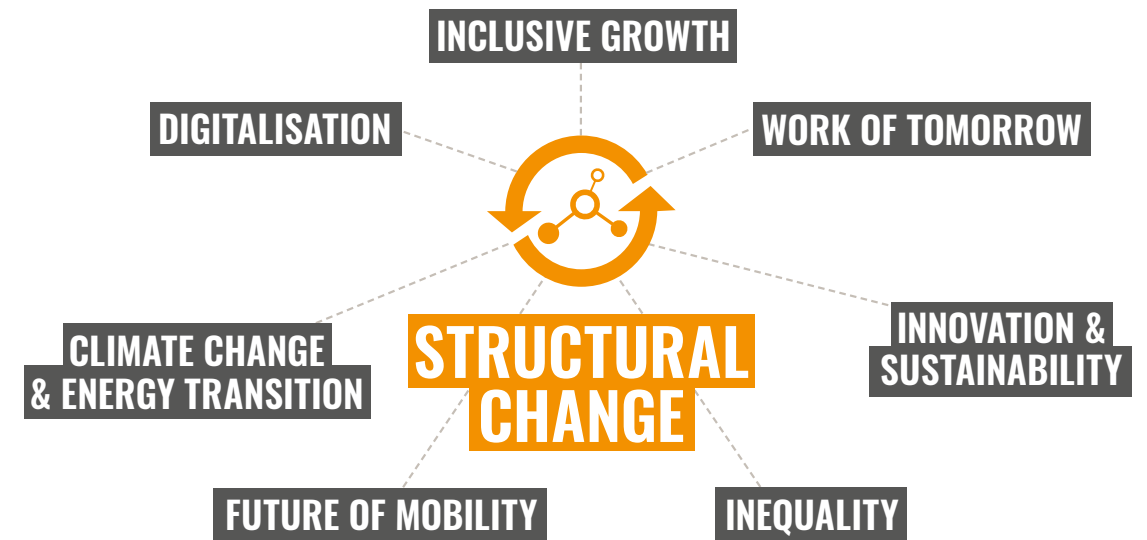
3 THE CONTRIBUTION OF A THINK TANK LIKE DAS PROGRESSIVE ZENTRUM

In the light of the challenges described above, the primary task for a progressive think tank is to respond critically and constructively to a changing world while providing orientation and initiating and promoting debates on renewal. This is also part of the claim and mission of **Das Progressive Zentrum** as an independent, non-partisan, non-profit organisation that is at the same time committed to a clear set of political ideas.

We want to contribute to **shaping progress by lending it a social, cosmopolitan and environmentally responsible direction** once again. In fulfilling this high aspiration, we want to set programmatic priorities above all in three overarching thematic areas:



1 In the programme area “**Future of Democracy**”, we make innovative contributions of our own to strengthening civil society, the democratic culture of debate and political representation and participation. With the “**Democracy Lab**”, we have created, in addition to a variety of debate formats and projects, an inventive and interdisciplinary location for reflection and forethought with a special emphasis on questions of democratic innovation and on how to deal with the right-wing populism that is threatening democracy.



2 The programme area “**Structural Change**” is mainly concerned with socio-economic issues such as digitalisation, the working world of tomorrow, inclusive growth, social innovations and social mobility, as well as climate change and the transition to renewable energy.



3 In the programme area “**International Relations**”, the focus is on issues of European integration and its aspects such as “**Social Europe**”, “**European Public**”, “**Interparliamentary Cooperation**”, “**Franco-German Friendship**”, “**Visegrád Group**”, “**Brexit**”, “**Globalisation and Migration**”, “**European Economic and Monetary Union**”, as well as on the transatlantic partnership. The aim is to establish strategic and expedient interconnections between German, European and international debates. *Das Progressive Zentrum* sees itself as a hinge between Western and East Central Europe and between Southern and Northern Europe, and at the same time cultivates close contacts to North America.

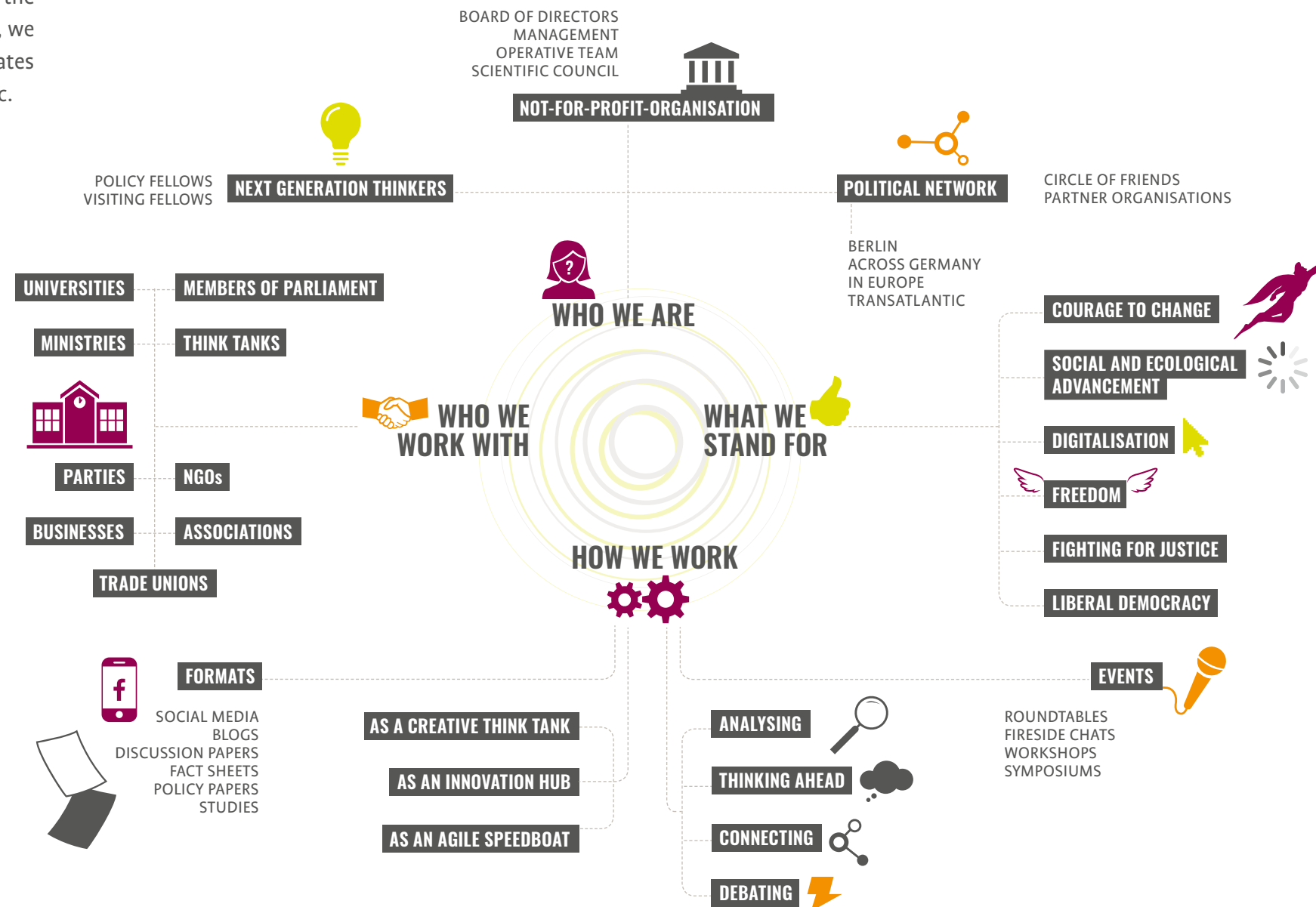
DAS PROGRESSIVE ZENTRUM AS A PLATFORM AND A NODE WITHIN A DYNAMIC NETWORK

Central to our work at the interface between science, politics, civil society, the media and business is in the first place the analysis of social, economic, environmental and political trends. To this end, we bring capable younger progressive thinkers together with experienced actors from various social fields to **develop concrete strategies and practical proposals** for an innovative politics geared to progress. In order to generate practical effects, we introduce the ideas we have developed in close cooperation with political and scientific institutions into the political process as offers. At the same time, we communicate the results of our studies, debates and practical recommendations to the public.

“We see ourselves as a dynamic point of convergence for new impulses and people who want to make a difference in society.”

Das Progressive Zentrum ultimately understands itself as a platform for informed debates about the contents and conditions of a progressive, evidence-based policy. We see ourselves as a dynamic point of convergence for new impulses and people who want to make a difference in society. We stand for the **unity of technological, scientific, social and humane progress**. Our opponents in contemporary social and political debates are the forces of antiliberal, authoritarian, neoliberal and backward-looking populist discourse.

It is our belief that, in order to create new perspectives for a policy of fair life chances for all and of a society that is more worth living in, we progressives must make our ideas more visible in public socio-political debates. In order to achieve this, we should continue to pool the diverse forces of social and liberal democracy in civil society, politics and business and form effective strategic alliances. Above all, we must build **confidence in the progressive cause** and in our own political creative powers and inspire society with a new progressive “spirit” – especially in dark times.





DAS PROGRESSIVE ZENTRUM

Das Progressive Zentrum (The Progressive Centre) is an independent, non-profit think tank 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 young German and European innovative thinkers and decision-makers in the debates. Its thematic priorities are situated within the three programme areas “Future of Democracy”, “Structural Change” and “International Relations” with a particular focus on European integration and the transatlantic partnership. The organisation is based in Berlin and also operates in many European countries (including France, Poland and Great Britain) and in the United States.

ABOUT THIS PAPER

The leading role in drafting this paper was taken by the Scientific Council of Das Progressive Zentrum with the close involvement of the Board of Directors, the Management, the Fellows and the Operative Team.

Translation by Dr. Ciaran Cronin

IMPRINT

All rights reserved. Reproduction or similar use of works by Das Progressive Zentrum, even in excerpts, is only permitted with prior written consent.

© Das Progressive Zentrum e.V., 2019

Responsible under the terms of German print media law: Dominic Schwickert
c/o Das Progressive Zentrum e.V.
Werftstraße 3 | 10577 Berlin

Board of Directors: Dr. Tobias Dürr, Michael Miebach, Katarina Niewiedzial
Executive Director: Dominic Schwickert
Head of the Scientific Council: Prof. Wolfgang Schroeder

Layout, graphic design & illustrations: Daniel Menzel, Florian Maaß

www.progressives-zentrum.org
mail@progressives-zentrum.org
www.facebook.com/dasprogressivezentrum
twitter: @DPZ_Berlin

progressives-zentrum.org

Thinking ahead.

Das Progressive Zentrum e.V.
Werftstraße 3
10557 Berlin, Germany

T +49 30 400 542 55
F +49 30 39 405 317
mail@progressives-zentrum.org

www.progressives-zentrum.org
fb.com/dasprogressivezentrum
twitter: @DPZ_Berlin