

SUMMIT PAPER

MOMENTUM FOR CHANGE

DEFINING A DECADE OF PROGRESS

#pgs21

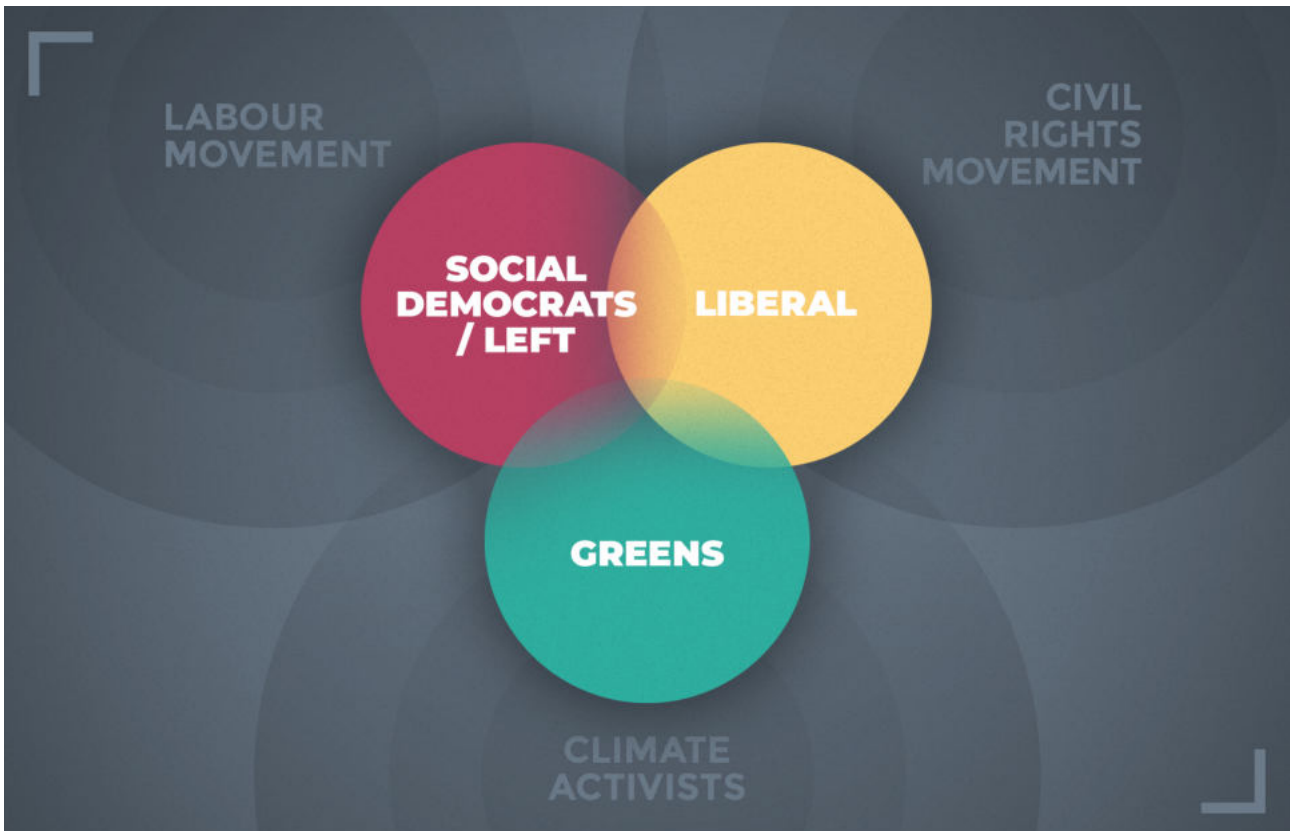
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For the last 20 years, centre-left parties and leaders around the globe have gathered on the stage of the Progressive Governance Conferences and Summits to openly debate the challenges of the future. From Santiago and Copenhagen to Hammanskraal and Berlin, the Conference has a distinguished history of convening progressive leaders from governments, think tanks, activism and academia to promote international debate and cooperation on progressive politics and policy. In recent years, the Progressive Governance Summit has emerged as a broad-church platform for dialogue between green, liberal, social democratic and left parties and movements to

exchange best practice and craft new progressive narratives. This year, the progressive movement will meet in a situation like no other.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic exploded in the early spring of 2020, our societies have collectively experienced the greatest social, economic and political upheaval since the two world wars of the 20th century. The health emergency has been unprecedented. Millions of lives have tragically been lost. Meanwhile, the aftershocks of the pandemic threaten to reorder almost every aspect of our economies and societies. The immediate task is to restore public confidence in the state by continuing to manage the disease effectively through vaccine roll-out and smart public health strategies. Yet the fundamental task that animates PGC 2021 is to address what the world and years ahead of us should look like in the aftermath of the pandemic. How can governments and the progressive community shape the 2020s as a decade of progress, defining a political settlement with citizens anchored in social and global justice? The progressive movement across the globe is

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Progressive political landscape in 2021

living through a defining moment. Crises are rare moments when windows of opportunity for radical change open up. Ten years ago, it was hoped the West was at a turning point, ushering in a decade of progressive reform. Despite that, political populism was ascendant, fuelling paralysis and polarisation. Yet COVID-19 has created a unique receptivity to social and economic innovation across the landscape of public policy. Like the former American President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, progressives must pursue “bold, persistent experimentation” initiating radical economic and social reforms that build bridges to, and confidence in, the future.¹

To seize this moment, our parties will need to be insurgents working to deliver change alongside citizens, rather than incumbents defending the status quo. We will unleash the democratic energy of citizens’ movements such as Black Lives Matter focused on tackling racial inequality; and Fridays for Future which is shifting the boundaries of debate on climate change; alongside social entrepreneurship and innovation to shape a new way of doing politics, forging new ideas, new institutions, new narratives and new programmes. Shaping them requires progressives to step outside conventional political and ideological categories, forging connections between the green, liberal and social democratic traditions. The age of the majoritarian socialist party winning power through the industrial working-class and middle-class is over. Plural alliances are the future of politics. Moreover, we have to look beyond the boundaries of any single nation-state. The pandemic has underlined the radical interdependence of our societies.


There are three key tasks if this is to be a defining decade for the progressive movement that prepares our societies for change by forging a new social covenant:

- Shaping new institutions and investing in capacities at all levels of governance to ensure the plentiful supply of high-quality public goods.

- Tackling inequalities and polarisation while addressing the long-term threat of climate change.
- Sustaining and reinvigorating new forms of global international coordination by challenging antidemocratic values and human rights violations perpetrated by authoritarian states.

We acknowledge that there is nothing inevitable about progressive reform, despite the seismic shifts engendered by the COVID-19 crisis. The global catastrophe has exposed the limitations of political populism, which failed to produce practical solutions to the problems engendered by the pandemic, underlined by the floundering incompetence of the Trump presidency in the United States. Yet the crisis has unleashed forces that could as easily fuel individualism and national chauvinism as solidarity and internationalism. Progressives will have to win big public debates that can redefine our world, identifying governing strategies that will succeed in increasingly fractured societies.

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The post-COVID state and governance

It is widely assumed the pandemic will transform the role of the state. Governments have assumed new responsibilities. The state’s purpose has been steadily transformed. We have lived through 40 years of relentless assault on the efficacy and legitimacy of the state. In the neoliberal era, the state was cut back to maximise the scope of individualism and expand markets. Our societies have paid a high price: privatisation and the negative

1. See “ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Address at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, Georgia” by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/288094> (last access: 25 May 2021).


effects of globalisation were felt hardest by the most vulnerable in society. COVID-19 has served as a reminder that government is a prevailing force for good in our societies. At the same time, confidence in the state cannot be taken for granted. There are winners and losers from the distribution of emergency government support, alongside deep cleavages between insiders and outsiders in labour markets and elsewhere. Becoming the de facto lender and employer of last resort puts states under unprecedented fiscal pressure. In many countries, public deficits and debt have been soaring. Moreover, the human catastrophe of the pandemic requires governments to strike a balance between liberty and security, with controversial consequences in many countries.

The COVID-19 crisis underlines the challenges of governance. New public systems will be required to deal effectively with future risks from pandemics to climate change. Dealing with the long-term imperative of reducing CO2 emissions will require huge investment in physical and social infrastructure. Governments need to develop capacities to anticipate problems, preventing crises from becoming acute, so underlining the critical role of preventative public policy. There is a crucial question of how to distribute power effectively: states with greater decentralisation may have advantages, emphasising the importance of multi-level governance. The European Union appears to have struggled at key points in the crisis, but it plays a decisive role in delivering the functions that the national governments cannot. Most importantly of all, citizens and communities need to be engaged in the effective pursuit of shared goals. Progressives need to harness the new energies that are animating civil society at the local level to achieve greater solidarity through practical action.

Post-crisis inequality and economic shocks

The pandemic and lockdowns across the world have led to an unprecedented contraction of economic output and GDP that will have long-term scarring effects. The risk of future outbreaks and

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new pandemics, and the need for prolonged periods of lockdown and reopening, has made it necessary to reorganise the economy, spurring digital transformation and accelerating the technological revolution. Meanwhile, COVID-19 has threatened to aggravate pre-existing inequalities between rich and poor, men and women, insiders and outsiders, younger and older generations, and within multi-ethnic communities. Those with “lovely” public sector jobs in the service-driven economy have barely been touched by the pandemic. Many relatively affluent households have amassed large savings. Those who do the “lousy” jobs in casualised, low wage sectors have faced the recurrent risks of unemployment as well as the virus itself, while their wages and living standards are sharply squeezed. Children and young people have been hit hard by the closure of schools and universities. Moreover, while wealthy places are likely to emerge unaffected from the crisis, poorer places exposed to the long-term process of deindustrialisation are at risk of being further left behind.

It is now widely predicted that advanced economies will quickly recover their pre-pandemic GDP, emerging largely unscathed from the crisis. Yet the conventional measures of economic growth, productivity and living standards have become almost meaningless. The new concern with human well-being ought to lead to a structural shift in the foundation of market economies. The basic assumptions of how economies operate are being overturned. The conventional wisdom of the market liberal era has been challenged on many issues from pay differentials to the global mobility of capital. Enabling free markets to


function unhindered, using the surplus generated from growth to fund the welfare state and public sphere, has been roundly discredited as a governing philosophy. The search is under way for more just and sustainable models of economic growth.

Global coordination and interdependence: revitalising the transatlantic partnerships

The pandemic has underlined the fundamental importance of global coordination and leadership. At a moment of existential crisis, it is understandable that citizens are tempted to look inward, to find reassurance in their own societies and communities. Indeed, most responses to the pandemic have been nationally focused. Consequently, there is a huge vacuum of leadership at

the global level. Moreover, there is a serious risk that national governments will refuse to cooperate, with potentially catastrophic consequences for the future management of the disease. Abandoning developing countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America to the pandemic is not only morally contemptible. It is contrary to the self-interest of western countries, since it will lead inevitably to further waves of the virus.

The election of President Biden in the United States and the radicalism of his agenda, which puts politics before economics, offers an enormous opportunity to revitalise progressive politics and the transatlantic alliance. We reject the “America first” policies of the Trump administration and seek to revive multilateral governance. We want to strengthen the United Nations while urging reform of the Socialist International so nations can cooperate effectively. A new era of global cooperation is within reach, underlined by the astonishing progress in producing a COVID vaccine through coordination between scientific communities across national borders. Having tackled the disease in the West, the priority will be to create a new compact between the Global North and Global South to contain the pandemic, while moving from immediate crisis management to the long-term alleviation of the inequalities that disfigure our world.

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The post-COVID social contract must establish new systems of public governance, tackle inequality, polarisation and the climate crisis, while creating institutions that reflect the reality of global interdependence. The Progressive Governance Digital Summit 2021 will dedicate itself to the task of forging this new agenda through dialogue between progressive forces in our societies.

Progressive Governance Digital Summit 2021



On 9, 10 and 11 June 2021, we are back with this year's Progressive Governance Digital Summit. As the political priorities shift from crisis management to the transition of societies and systems post-pandemic, progressives must lead a new political era defined by courage and action. This year's summit is focusing on how to build forward-thinking political coalitions that can lay the foundations to make the 2020s a decade of progress. And winning progressive majorities is more important than ever. After living in a pandemic for more than a year and experiencing a decade of inequality, planet degradation, and threats to liberal democracies by far-right actors, bold structural reform is needed to leave no person or community behind.

www.progressive-governance.eu
question@progressive-governance.eu

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.

www.progressives-zentrum.org
mail@progressives-zentrum.org
Twitter: @DPZ_Berlin
www.fb.com/DasProgressiveZentrum

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V.i.S.d.P.: Dominic Schwickert
c/o Das Progressive Zentrum e.V.
Werftstraße 3 | 10557 Berlin, Germany

Board: Michael Miebach, Judith Siller, Katarina Niewiedzial, Thomas Kralinski
Executive Director: Dominic Schwickert

Editors: Patrick Diamond (lead), Florian Ranft

Graphic Design & Layout: Daniel Menzel

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