



**TRANSATLANTIC
DIALOGUE ON THE
INDUSTRIAL
HEARTLANDS**

DEMOCRACY CLOSEST TO HOME

**Principles for Local Leadership
in Industrial Heartlands**

By Benjamin Harrington, Colleen Dougherty,
Emily Adams, Linus Platzer, Milad Tabesch

JANUARY 2026



ABOUT THE INDUSTRIAL HEARTLANDS FELLOWS

The Industrial Heartlands Fellows Working Group on Climate, Work, and Innovation comprises seven young professionals from the United States and Germany. As part of the “Transatlantic Dialogue on the Industrial Heartlands” project, we traveled to the US Midwest as well as West and East Germany over the past 24 months, engaging with numerous organisations and individuals who are deeply involved in shaping the future of industrial heartlands. Our engagements provided valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities in these regions. This policy brief reflects on our findings, and aims to provide actionable recommendations for policymakers and change makers in both the United States and Germany.

This transatlantic initiative underscores the importance of collaborative efforts in addressing contemporary challenges in our societies.



ABSTRACT

Industrial heartlands in Germany and the United States face intersecting challenges that threaten democratic resilience: political polarisation, demographic decline, economic vulnerability, and eroding institutional trust. These pressures disproportionately affect younger people whilst creating openings for populist movements.

This paper proposes three principles for local leadership. First, invest in civic infrastructure through community organisers and civic hosts who counter social isolation and misinformation. Second, build trust through honest, local-

ly grounded communication that explains transformation policies in accessible terms rather than abstract promises. Third, earn trust through visible action on everyday priorities — maintained infrastructure and tangible neighbourhood improvements — not distant mega-projects alone.

Successful transformation requires that residents experience change as understandable, participatory, and beneficial in daily life. When communities can see change, shape it, and trust those leading it, they sustain confidence in democratic institutions during profound transition.

INTRODUCTION

Our transatlantic study tour with Das Progressive Zentrum across Germany's industrial regions provided firsthand insight into how communities manage structural change while sustaining trust in local institutions. From the Rhineland to Lusatia, we met mayors, civic leaders, and residents testing new approaches to participation, economic development, and community engagement. Their experiences mirrored challenges in U.S. Midwest industrial regions that we experienced during our previous tour of Pittsburgh, Erie, Youngstown, and Detroit in 2024. Discussions centred around the desire to feel rooted, represented, and confident that their region offers a viable future.

Since our 2024 tour of U.S. industrial heartlands, transatlantic uncertainty — from climate and trade to security and migration — has only intensified. Local and regional leaders must navigate both geopolitical turbulence and the long-term structural changes reshaping their communities. Industrial heartlands in Germany and the United States have become crucial testing grounds for democratic resilience. Given their outsized political influence, how these regions manage transformation will shape not only local futures but the stability of the transatlantic relationship itself. Young leaders rooted in these communities must therefore be central to shaping what comes next.

As young professionals with deep personal and professional ties to these industrial regions, we recognised clear patterns across Germany and the United States. Trust grows where leadership is visible and accountable, where local identity is respected, and where place-based investments create tangible improvements in daily life. We also saw how, in the absence of these conditions, loneliness, disconnection, opaque communication, and slow or uneven delivery undermine confidence in democratic institutions.

This paper highlights insights from our journey and proposes a set of principles for local leadership rooted in our experiences as a younger generation of transatlantic leaders navigating structural change. Our recommendations emphasise civic connection and identity, locally grounded communication, and visible delivery. They prioritize steady, credible progress over headline projects, so communities can see, understand, and co-own change. These approaches offer practical strategies to strengthen democracy where it is experienced most directly: in local communities.

FRAMING THE CHALLENGE

Germany's industrial heartlands are undergoing profound structural transformation. Regions once anchored in coal, steel, and manufacturing face persistent economic restructuring, demographic change, and shifting political landscapes. Emerging opportunities in technology, services, and sustainable industries offer potential pathways for growth, but geographic unevenness in development and perceived gaps between national policy and local reality contributes to simmering political frustration and economic insecurity among residents. For example, while national programmes such as the *Strukturstärkungsgesetz Kohleregien* ("coal-region structural strengthening law") offer new opportunities for investment to support the phase out of the coal industry, many residents, especially young people, struggle to see the benefits in their daily lives.



Across our visits, five interconnected pressures repeatedly surfaced:

- **Political polarisation and populism:**
once fringe movements gaining mainstream support and shaping public discourse.
- **Demographic pressures:**
an ageing population and the outmigration of young residents challenge social cohesion and local service provision.
- **Economic vulnerability:**
job losses, industrial decline, and limited access to emerging sectors fuel material insecurity and perceptions of stagnation.
- **Social and civic challenges:**
loneliness, digital misinformation, and declining trust in institutions weaken community networks and undermine democratic engagement.
- **Safety and well-being concerns:**
both real and perceived threats further erode confidence in local governance and public institutions.

These intersecting pressures especially impact young people — who shoulder the dual burden of building their own futures while inheriting the consequences of long-term decline and uneven development. Additionally, the multi-pronged challenge facing these industrial regions has enabled competing visions of the future from right-wing and populist parties to be successful. To help communities cultivate a positive vision for their futures, local and regional leaders need to make change visible, understandable, and shared.



PRINCIPLES FOR LOCAL LEADERSHIP

Principle 1: Invest in Dialogue and Civic Development

Across both Germany and the U.S., one insight stood out: democracy is strongest where people regularly encounter one another in meaningful ways. As civic life becomes more dispersed, the most enduring infrastructure we can build is human connection. Everyday spaces of dialogue are essential for cultivating a sense of belonging and trust. Communities are relying on the local relationships that make people feel seen, heard, and part of a shared future to sustain engagement and democracy.

During our study tours, we observed this civic infrastructure in action. We met with community organisers, educators, and other “democratic hosts” who maintain democratic dialogue and community networks, despite limited capital, insufficient space, or lack of institutional support. Spaces like the meeting point *Café No. 5* in Erkelenz (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany), the youth initiative *Ruhrpott für Europa* in Bochum (North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany), and Erie’s *Jefferson Educational Society’s Civic Leadership Academy* (Pennsylvania, U.S.), show that participation is not a singular event but a continuous practice of care. These places create opportunities for residents to facilitate conversations, exchange stories, deliberate differences, navigate conflict, and imagine solutions together. Many of these efforts operate outside formal political structures because they remain intentionally nonpartisan. These encounters cultivate trust through presence and time spent together, while building a shared understanding of community needs.

Investing in such civic hosts, along with youth initiatives, means developing a new, community-grounded civic leadership culture. An effective model blends social and emotional intelligence, media literacy, and the courage to engage across demographic and ideological divides. Training programs like at the NRW *Talentzentrum* in Gelsenkirchen, North Rhine-Westphalia illustrate how training rooted locally can prepare a generation of new voices to take responsibility in their communities.

Across both countries, local actors described a feedback loop between social isolation and misinformation. When residents lack routine civic touchpoints — places to compare experiences, verify claims, and resolve conflicts — misleading narratives fill the vacuum and shape perceptions that drift from local reality. This directly affects governance: fragmented information reduces willingness to participate and weakens trust in public decisions. Leaders should therefore invest in regular, place-based forums, physical and digital, that enable direct exchange and provide credible local reference points.

Taken together, our experiences point to the same lesson: democracy endures when people experience it as a lived relationship. Strengthening civic life is not only a defensive strategy against polarisation and misinformation — it is an affirmative investment in the capacity of communities to solve problems together. Countering fear with participation, and polarisation with trust, is the common task for heartland democracies on both sides of the Atlantic.



Democracy is strongest where people regularly encounter one another in meaningful ways.

Principle 2: Build Trust Through Honest and Consistent Communication

Federal governments in both the United States and Germany have taken a more active approach towards structural policy for regional transformation, including the Inflation Reduction Act and Germany's Investitionsgesetz Kohleregionen ("Investment Act for Coal Regions"). Yet, across our recent tour in the Rhenish and Lusatian lignite regions, residents and local officials described a persistent challenge: while policy frameworks and transformation funding and projects created by administrators at the regional and federal level are extensive, the intended benefits are often unclear or intangible at the local level and in everyday life. Questions about long-term impact remain unresolved — specifically whether these projects will create durable jobs, strengthen social cohesion, or deliver environmental improvements — and the benefits of public efforts to transform these regions are, to date, only partially felt, understood, or broadly shared by society.

Simultaneously, young people who live in industrial regions often hear about "opportunity" in abstract terms tied to structural policies, while facing precarious employment, expensive housing, and uncertain pathways to stable careers. During our visits to the Rhenish and Lusatian coal regions, residents expressed confusion about the pace of change, the allocation of funds, and what new job markets will realistically look like.

These practices matter not only for policy implementation, but also to address structural pressures that influence democratic participation. Polarised media, demographic shifts, and economic vulnerability shape how communities perceive policy and change. Consistent, credible communication helps counter the misinformation isolation mentioned previously while providing a framework for meaningful participation.

Young people respond well to leaders who communicate clearly, acknowledge challenges, and engage in two-way conversation. Overoptimistic promises, by contrast, undermine trust, especially when infrastructure projects, climate transitions, or economic development plans inevitably face delays.



Improving the effectiveness of regional transformation requires attention to communication and outreach. Several needs emerged consistently:

- **Clear, locally grounded communication** that explains policy goals, timelines, and implications in practical terms, paired with intentional outreach to community actors.
- **Inclusive engagement** that brings civil society and opposition voices into planning and feedback processes, helping ensure that decisions are not perceived as predetermined.
- **Accessible messaging** that links everyday concerns with long-term strategies, rather than relying on abstract visualisations or highly technical materials.
- **Honesty about constraints and trade-offs**, which residents consistently described as more credible than optimistic promises that overlook uncertainty or delays.

Principle 3: Earn Trust Through Visible Action


Public trust is not earned through grand declarations but through consistent and visible progress. Well-maintained roads, improved classrooms, and well-kept parks turn distant goals into lived experiences. When residents see practical improvements, they begin to believe that their hometowns still have room for their ambitions and a future worth investing in.

Successful delivery is seldom about completing mega-projects or drafting grand redevelopment schemes. It depends on whether residents see the issues they care about most being addressed. In Görlitz, Saxony, the careful maintenance of historic architecture has given the city a distinct identity and sense of pride, yet traveling to or from Berlin still requires a slow, indirect train trip that residents note has remained inadequate for decades. In Pittsburgh and Detroit, cities have poured resources into downtown renewal, yet surrounding neighbourhoods have spent years waiting for action as abandoned homes, unrepared streets, and derelict structures continue to sit unchanged. These gaps between what governments prioritise and what residents experience erode trust and make it harder to build support for larger, long-term goals. Visible progress on the fundamentals is what creates the political and financial capital needed to tackle the bigger challenges communities face.


Youngstown, Ohio, offers a different model. The community organisation *Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation* led by a homecomer — someone who left, returned, and chose to invest in the city that raised him — worked with residents and city officials to develop and implement small-area plans block by block. A decade later, neighbourhoods once written off are lived in again, with repaired homes, new streets, and replanted trees. The scale was modest, but the progress was visible, and residents could point to real changes in places that mattered to them.

Across the heartlands, many of the most credible actors are homecomers like Youngstown's: people who return with new skills but speak with the authority of someone who belongs. They help translate long-term goals into practical projects and bring momentum to efforts that have stalled. Regional governments can support homecomers through targeted recruitment at universities where local students study, relocation grants, and mentorship programs that connect returnees with established civic leaders.

Visible renewal ultimately begins with the assets communities already have and grows through steady, incremental improvements. Every restored building, reopened daycare, and replanted park reinforces that residents matter and that government can still deliver. Trust returns through the reliability people witness in their daily lives, not through what leaders promise from afar.



Public trust is not earned through grand declarations but through consistent and visible progress.





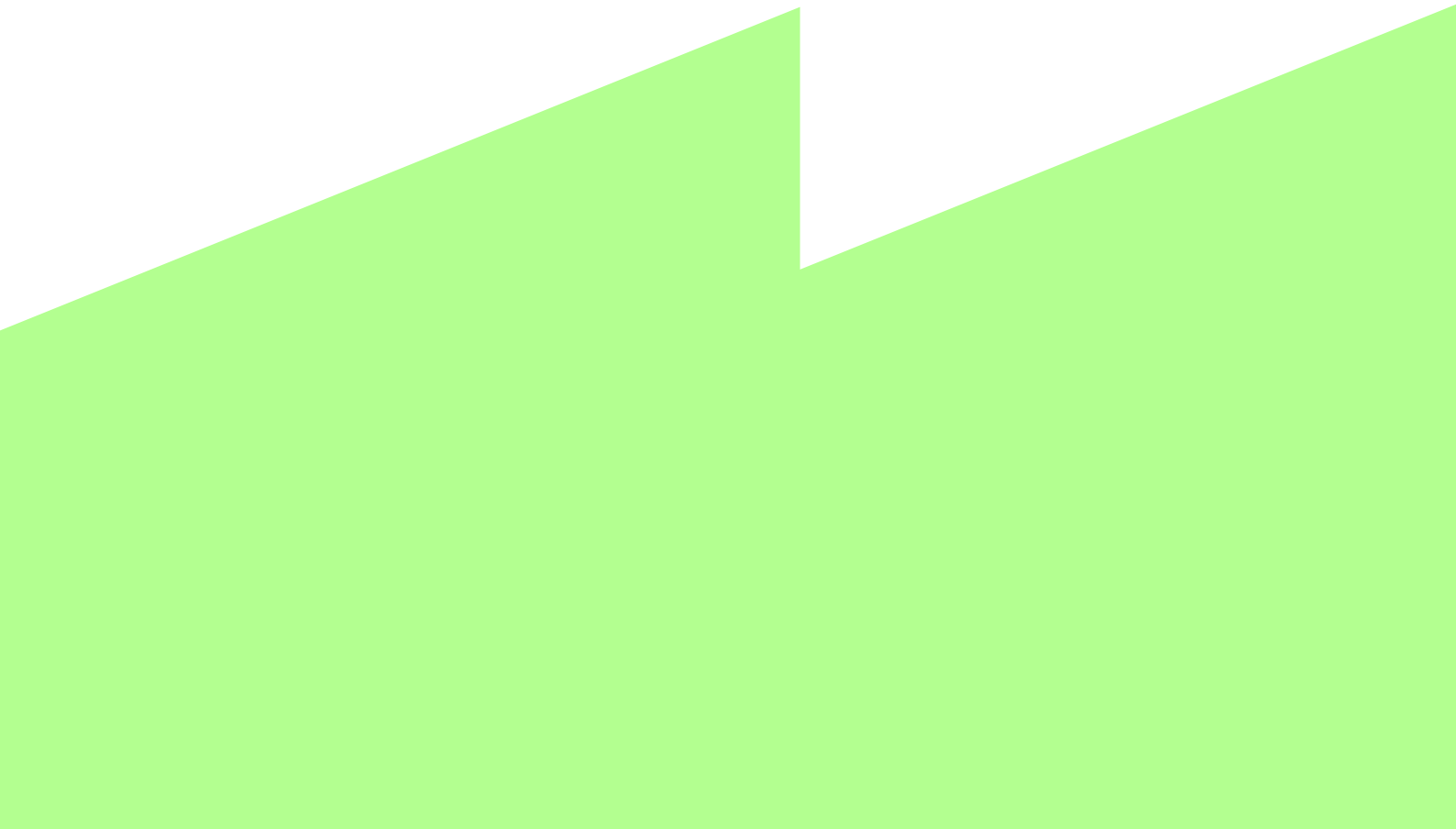


CONCLUSION

Structural change, whether driven by climate policy, economic transition, or demographic shifts, will succeed only if it is rooted in local realities, built through genuine dialogue, communicated transparently, and made visible through consistent delivery.

The path forward requires both investment and attention. Regional and federal governments must resource local civic infrastructure – not as an afterthought, but as essential to transformation itself. Local leaders must prioritise the unglamorous fundamentals: the repaired playground, the honest town hall, the welcomed homecomer. These are not substitutes for economic strategy; they are what makes economic strategy work.

Our transatlantic experiences show that democratic renewal happens in daily life: in the neighbourhood, at the workplace or civic dialogue spaces. When communities can see change, shape it, and trust those leading it, they invest in their own futures. That investment – in place, in each other, in democracy itself – is what transforms industrial heartlands into resilient regions ready for what comes next.





ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Benjamin Harrington is Community Development Director for the City of Little Canada, Minnesota.

Colleen Dougherty is Economic Development and Regional Policy Professional in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Emily Adams is German Chancellor Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations.

Linus Platzer is Policy Advisor for Transformation at Rheinisches Revier at Naturschutzbund Deutschland (NABU).

Milad Tabesch is Founder, Managing Director & Project Co-Lead at Ruhrpott für Europa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Claire Ainsley and John Austin for their valuable input and generous support.





IMPRINT

Publisher:

© Das Progressive Zentrum e.V., 2026. All rights reserved.

Reprinting or use of any work from Das Progressive Zentrum, including excerpts, is not permitted without prior written consent.

Published in January 2026

V.i.S.d.P.:

Dominic Schwickert

c/o Das Progressive Zentrum e.V.

Werftstraße 3 | 10557 Berlin, Germany

www.progressives-zentrum.org

mail@progressives-zentrum.org

Board:

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Schroeder, Judith Siller,
Joachim Knodt

Chair of the Advisory Council:

Prof. Dr. Anke Hassel

Managing Director:

Dominic Schwickert

Editorial Support Team:

Axel Ruppert, Florian Ranft, Jan Kjell Lange

Graphic Design & Illustrations:

Łukasz Czeladziński

A project by

School of Foreign Service
BMW Center for German and European Studies

DAS

PROGRESSIVE
ZENTRUM

Supported by

Federal Ministry
for Economic Affairs
and Climate Action



Visit us on social media:



dpzberlin.bsky.social



[Das Progressive Zentrum](#)



[dpz_berlin](#)



www.industrial-heartlands.com