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**BRINGING
THE FUTURE
BACK TO
DEMOCRACY**

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BRINGING THE FUTURE BACK TO DEMOCRACY

In the face of systemic challenges such as the climate crisis, we must transform the way we live, consume and produce as societies. Yet, no transformation can succeed without a clear sense of direction. We need tangible visions of the future that unify and integrate democracies on their way forward. Innocracy 2020 will tap into a reality that does not yet exist, openly exploring the options that lie ahead of us. This paper is a call to action to collectively discuss how we can together create visions for a more just and sustainable future during, and after, Innocracy 2020.

For decades, Western societies have been characterised by their belief in the permanence of the status quo. A world defined by a virtually hegemonic reality, declaring the ground rules of both the political and economic system as sacred. In this world without alternatives, competing visions of future society have no place as the future is conceived of as nothing but a linear and necessary continuation of the past.

The events of 2019 and 2020 have decisively changed this. In 2019, the global protest movement around Fridays for Future and other activist groups, shifted what was conceivable and utterable in mainstream political discourse. The protests were so timely and powerful that their demands and proposals for radical reform were able to change the political dynamic. For a short while, political incrementalism seemed but one option of how politics can be done, and decision-makers were pressured to seriously consider transformative, systemic approaches for slowing down the climate crisis.

In early 2020, COVID-19 began spreading across Europe. Within weeks, the pandemic forced governments and parliaments all over the continent to reconsider their role and authority. Massive interventions into the economy, public life and civil liberties followed, on a scale unthinkable even at the beginning of March 2020. Due to the crisis, societies all over Europe realised that contrary to the belief cultivated in earlier years, they do indeed have the capability to change course, through swift and decisive political decision-making. For a short

while, the auto-pilot of political incrementalism was paused and the primacy of the economy was put on hold, clearly trumped by the primacy of politics.

Obviously, neither Fridays for Future nor the COVID-19 pandemic are reasons for joy. And yet, the past 18 months have brought a decisive shift for how democratic transformation is being talked about. Amongst progressives, we no longer have to make the case for a transformative approach to politics. No longer must we remind political decision-makers that the transformative potential of politics is stronger than the political willingness to tap into it. No longer must we demonstrate that the age of TINA (there is no alternative) has come to an end and a vivid debate about alternative futures has begun instead.

A STEP TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE POLITICS

The lessons from the past months are important, as they have the potential to enable us to better deal with future crises. Over the coming decades, the massive, non-linear fallout of the climate crisis, and an increasing geopolitical fragility will force us to deal with structural shock events on a scale comparable to the COVID-19 pandemic. With this comes the political necessity to do everything possible to systemically increase societal resilience, while decreasing the factors which, as of today, catalyse the very crises we will be dealing with in the near future.

The experience of 2019 and 2020 may be an important foundation for such a transformative approach to politics. The events of the past months unfroze the status quo-paralysis that Western societies have experienced for too long. They strengthened the notion that we are

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capable of reconfiguring the human-made, and take decisive steps to meet the existential challenges we face as global society. Compared to the political environment of Innocracy 2019, this is a major step forward. The public and political perspective have been widened beyond the limitations of the status quo. The idea that politics is not powerful enough to substantially change our world is being challenged.

AWAY-FROM OR TOWARDS?

At the same time, it is clear that our last months' responses to the crises we face have been mostly driven by an "away-from-dynamic". We know we must lower our CO2 footprint, we know that we must make our health systems more resilient. While there is nothing wrong with these insights, the political agenda that results from them still feels like crisis-driven patchwork. This is mostly due to the fact that, as democratic societies, we lack a "towards -dynamic", a strategic idea of the steps we have to undertake to meaningfully transform society. In other words, there are no coherent, positive visions of where we are headed, and thus there is a strategic void in politics. We lack an imagined point in future history, a point European society and politics can strategically focus on and move towards during the coming years. A point that orients, bundles and explains the various, fundamental reforms we must achieve in the following years and decades.

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While many political professionals reflexively scoff at the idea of creating visions, it is actually a common strategic practice in many other professional fields and sectors. Most leaders in the business world understand that an accepted, aspiring vision of what their organisation aims to be increases their collective capability to make coherent, strategic decisions. They know that the creation of an accepted vision helps to orient and align people who otherwise would feel disoriented. Aspiring towards long term visions increases the collective understanding of what potential futures could look like – and thus sharpens an operative focus that goes beyond the limitations set by the status quo.

Visions substantiate the sense that citizens do indeed have a choice; that they can opt between differing long-term visions of where society should be headed.

The creation of competing, realistic yet aspiring visions of future societies has various advantages for both the world of politics and political discourse. First, it substantiates the sense that citizens do indeed have a choice; that they can opt between differing long-term visions of where society should be headed. Second, it strengthens a sense of orientation, both in politics itself and society. Third, compelling societal visions help ease the political tendency to invest all energy into stabilising the status quo. They expand the strategic focus beyond what is, in favour of the worlds that could be. Fourth, they help us overcome presentism and include the fundamental needs of future generations in today's policy making. Long-term visions are an effective tool to better safeguard the interests of generations to come and meet our moral obligation of intergenerational justice.

CREATING A VISION: WHAT IT TAKES

Creating a vision requires human facets that go beyond what the professional political sector cultivates today, namely: imagining, speculating, feeling. It takes human capabilities that are currently neither common nor respected in today's political world, which has the tendency to dismiss imagination, and the courageous ideas it produces. As if imagination was nothing but a naïve act of dreaming, lacking both substance and consequence.

This, we believe, is a mistake. There is no fundamental change without imagination - not as an end itself but as a strategic tool. Only those who fall in love with alternatives to the existing reality have the strength to change it. Only those who follow the intuitive feeling that lays the path into another future have the strength to overcome the boundaries of the status quo. Indeed, dreams, intuitions and feelings accompany the beginning of every substantial change. They may seem diffuse, irrational, or perhaps a little crazy at first sight. But without them, we would never sit down and think more carefully about the steps we have to take to turn dreams into reality, intuition into knowledge.

THIS YEAR'S CONFERENCE

This is why Innocracy 2020 will be focused on visions of a future society under the title “Bringing the Future Back to Democracy”. We will listen to how speakers envision their life in a future society. We will learn about methods and frameworks that help us feel, think about and create the future. We will hear about projects, where the future can already be experienced today. And we will reflect on how we can move towards shared visions in times of polarisation and systemic challenges.

This conference will pose fundamental questions, hoping that asking them will help us dare to move into the unknown, trusting that this is where answers will be found:

- **Imagining alternatives:** How can we develop ambitious, compelling and tangible societal visions in the age of systemic challenges such as the climate crisis?
- **Going beyond linear thinking:** How can we develop a vision of the future that does not solely feed from our understanding of the past? How can we move from an “away from-dynamic” to a “toward-dynamic”?
- **Expanding our minds and hearts:** How might we use empathy and rationality to go beyond the boundaries of today's economic and political paradigms?
- **From “ought” to “can”:** How do we overcome the gap between the desirable and the feasible?
- **Decolonising the future:** To what extent should the rights, needs and interests of future generations guide our policy making today?
- **Visions as democratic strategies:** What methods exist to create future visions and how do they differ?
- **Micro-macro-learning:** What can individual transformation teach us about societal transformation and vice versa?

We believe that answers and inklings in response to these questions can be found in a process of reflection and collective sensemaking. This is why, after every input session, we will take the time to reflect at the Innocracy Homebase – a format that helps us identify patterns and common threads that run through the inputs and impulses by our speakers and guests.

THE CONFERENCE RESULTS

When processing the conference results, we will be referring to

- ➔ the input from the conference speakers
- ➔ the findings and materials from the conference workshops
- ➔ the input and feedback from participants
- ➔ the input and feedback from our international network of partner organisations
- ➔ and the output of the past three Innocracy Conferences.

After the conference, we will be weaving these pieces together, aiming to distill a narrative mosaic. With the help of our partners, we will be manifesting results that support future-oriented political institutions and decision-makers in embracing and strengthening visionary narratives, providing them with specific insights on how political reforms can be strategically aligned towards desired futures.

Imagining the future requires forms of dialogue that are representative of our wider society. More than anything, this paper is a call to action to collectively discuss how we can together create visions for a more just and sustainable future during, and after, Innocracy 2020. This paper is intended as a work in progress and an invitation to all those who are taking part in Innocracy 2020 to collect and develop tools, strategies and ideas to bring the future back to democracy.

Innocracy 2020 will tap into a reality that does not yet exist, openly exploring the options that lie ahead of us. We invite you to join us in exploring visions for a future that is ecologically and socially more sustainable than the present – and look forward to meeting you online!

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AUTHORS



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Paulina Fröhlich is Head of the Future of Democracy Programme. She directs innovative dialogue projects, such as „Europa Hört“, designs and curates Innocracy, a conference on democratic transformation, and co-authors discussion papers, such as „Glottz nicht so romantisch“ and the study „Die Talkshow-Gesellschaft“. Fröhlich also heads the development of the digital platform „European Hub for Civic Engagement“. Previously, Paulina worked in water management and development cooperation. In 2016 she co-founded the initiative „Kleiner Fünf“ and is now its media spokesperson.



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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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Over the past three 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 brilliant people and organisations from all across Europe, who work in this field. 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.

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