

# WHAT'S AT STAKE\*



## OUR SOCIETIES AFTER CORONA

SIX SCENARIOS  
FOR 2025

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#pgs20

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## Executive Summary

There is a lot at stake for our societies. A complete return to the “old normality” after the coronavirus pandemic is unlikely and, maybe, to some extent undesirable. The future is wide open: There is a chance for the dawn of a new progressive age. But looming is also the danger of slipping into a world of illiberalism and selfishness. To highlight which courses of action and windows of opportunities exist for progressives in the upcoming years, in this paper we describe six scenarios for the year 2025. Six completely different pictures of how our world could look like in five years: New Golden Age, Varieties of Localism, Radical Individualism, Welfare Technocracy, National Populism, and School Trip. These scenarios are not simply divided into positive and negative ones. Several scenarios have attributes that appear desirable for progressives. And with some of these characteristics, the progressive camp is undoubtedly divided on how desirable such a world would in fact be.

The scenarios we present here are not predictions, they cannot foretell the future. They are instruments that might help with imagining possible futures. They describe turning points, opportunities seized and opportunities missed. As a whole, the scenarios illustrate the urgency for progressive action. Thus, in the second half of this paper, we formulate an outline of a progressive agenda for the next years to come. This outline is divided into four main themes: 1. Safeguarding and innovating democracy, 2. Pushing for a just and sustainable transformation, 3. Making a progressive case for Europe and a new era of multilateralism, and, perhaps most importantly, 4. New progressive leadership. The next months will decide if progressives can be successful in winning the public argument over how to interpret the crisis and the challenges it reveals. Progressives must set out to lead the renewal of our society out of the crisis. Towards more democracy, a new economic order and a fresh start for the multilateral project. This will not be possible without a broad coalition across national and party boundaries. And this is exactly the purpose of the Progressive Governance Digital Summit 2020.

# Introduction

How will the next months of the coronavirus pandemic unfold – and what comes after? A complete return to “old normality” is unlikely and, maybe, to some extent undesirable. So how can the current tensions in society be turned into progressive action? To answer this question, we start by describing how our world could look like in five years' time. The scenarios we will present in the following pages emphasise windows of opportunity for progressive actors. To be clear right from the start: We take the current situation as a chance to begin a new progressive era. But the fact that the future is not determined also implies that slipping into a world of illiberalism and selfishness is a real danger. Only when progressives form broad alliances to win the public argument over current developments, will the transformation into a more solidaric, sustainable, and livable world of tomorrow stand a chance.

To find out how a progressive transformation project can actually succeed or fall apart, we cranked-up the time machine and went on six different trips to the year 2025. Obviously, scenarios are not forecasts, they do not predict the future. Scenarios are instruments to think about possible futures, about turning points, about opportunities seized and opportunities missed. For this paper, twenty-five progressive minds from politics, media, journalism, business and civil society came together to create images of the future and stories about how these futures came about.

The goal was to examine the possibilities and dangers of different scenarios, and to develop robust strategies for action. The scenarios outlined in this paper do not necessarily reflect the opinions or preferences of these twenty-five contributors and their institutions. They are intended to sharpen our thinking about the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic and to demonstrate the urgency for progressive action. After a glance into six different futures, we will present an outline for

a progressive agenda in times of crisis, first ideas on how to turn the current crisis into a progressive society of tomorrow.

## Dimensions of Uncertainty

Reliable predictions on how the coronavirus crisis will change the world economically, politically, and socially, are currently difficult to make. There are numerous dimensions on which the effects of the pandemic could lead to a significant shift. For this reason, we have defined six main dimensions of uncertainty to be able to grasp these effects analytically.

- **1. Economic and humanitarian toll:** Will the crisis lead to a long-term economic slow-down? When will a vaccine be globally available? Will there be a second and third wave? Will the virus mutate and confront us with new challenges? How many more people will be harmed by Covid-19?
- **2. Cooperation between states:** Will the global cooperation between countries revert to purely transactional relationships? Will new alliances between nations emerge? Will the international organisations gain or lose relevance? How will the Global North conduct itself in relation with the Global South?
- **3. Solidarity within societies:** On which communal and societal levels will solidarity be practiced in the future? How inclusive will this solidarity be? How much solidarity will different societal groups receive?
- **4. Relationship between state and citizens:** How will citizens' trust in states and governments develop? How repressive will states act? Which responsibilities will the states allot their citizens? Will forms of political participation change?

- **5. Relationships between state and economy:** Will states take a more active role within the economy? Will the privatisation of services of general interest be undone? Will governments protect companies and industries through protectionist measures? Will tensions between nation states and global corporations increase or will there be deeper cooperation?
- **6. Prevailing concept of the Good Life:** Will there be a change in values? Will there be a turn towards materialism or post-materialism? Will cosmopolitanism and communitarianism rise or fall?

## Scenarios

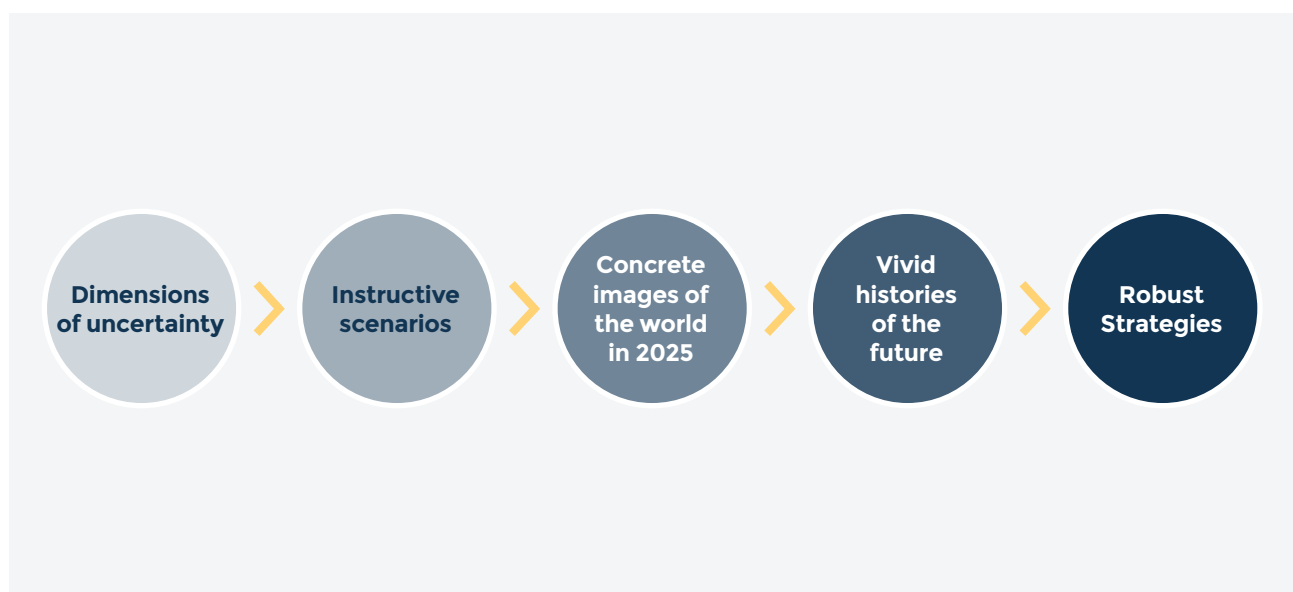
Combinations of the above outlined dimensions of uncertainty provide very different scenarios. Below we will describe six scenarios that seem particularly instructive:

1. **New Golden Age**
2. **Varieties of Localism**
3. **Radical Individualism**
4. **Welfare Technocracy**
5. **National Populism**
6. **School Trip**

These scenarios should help to structure our thinking about the world after the coronavirus crisis. From a progressive perspective, the scenarios

are (un)desirable to different degrees. They are not simply distributed into positive and negative scenarios. Several scenarios have characteristics that seem desirable for progressives. And with some of these characteristics, the progressive camp is undoubtedly divided on how desirable such a world would be.

All scenarios present exaggerated results of possible developments. The actual future might feature aspects of different scenarios – and also take a completely different turn. And: the future that eventually materialises will not only be dependent on exogenous factors. How progressives act today will determine in which world, in which society, we will live in tomorrow.



## SCENARIO 1

**New Golden Age****The World in 2025**

The prevailing interpretation of the coronavirus crisis is that liberal democracies have managed the crisis best. Using smart measures they have been able to act quickly and avert great economic, social and health damage. They have used the crisis for a future-oriented social and ecological renewal. People are speaking about a “Just and Green New Deal”. Increased public debt does not lead to panic among financial market analysts since most of them believe that a strategy of public investment will pay-off economically in the long-term. Populist parties and leaders have been weakened by the apparent fact that cooperation between states and multinational alliances have prevented the most disastrous consequences of the pandemic. Ideologies focussed on national isolation drastically lost their appeal. A politically and economically unified Europe and democratically governed United States were able to take on a new role as a solidary global crisis manager – mostly due to their free supply of vaccines, which have been distributed through WHO vaccination programs.



**A politically and economically unified Europe and democratically governed United States were able to take on a new role as solidary global crisis managers.**

In response to the extreme burden certain parts of society carried during the pandemic, most liberal democracies have developed a so-called “New Social Contract”: There is a strong appreciation for social and community-oriented professions, a more equal distribution of care work and a set of new rights for workers. Furthermore, substantial resources have been allocated to the development of urban and rural public spaces. For many people these spaces are of utmost importance as an extension of their personal sphere of life.

In many countries citizens have experienced how science-based crisis management and reliable reporting by free and independent media have determined how well societies coped with the pandemic. This has greatly improved their trust in public research, the media, and politics. The fact that liberal democracies have transformed their federal and local administration, which are now built around the needs and fundamental freedoms and rights of their citizens, has played a crucial role here. This also has increased the worldwide appeal of the model of liberal democracy.

Economic action is “re-embedded” into society. Economic growth is not an end in itself. Governments stimulate economic dynamism, aligning it with the needs of present and future generations. Governments play a prominent role as providers of public goods that are important to society as a whole (e.g. mobility, health, housing). Stimulus packages and increased incomes

for “societally relevant” occupations increased domestic consumption. Some countries pushed for a back-sourcing of supply chains.

The pandemic has fundamentally shaken the self-image of many citizens and their general image of humankind. What would have happened, if we had not got off so lightly? What is really important in life? What has value? What kind of world will the next generation inherit? In all central realms of life (work, relationships, housing, education) the question of quality of life has been posed anew. The dominating ideal is one of a self-determined, free and sustainable life in peaceful coexistence and solidarity with fellow human beings and nature. Mental illnesses such as burnout and depression have reached a low point.

## What Happened

At the end of 2020, a second wave of the coronavirus spread and killed many people. Europe, China, Japan and South Korea succeeded in isolating the local source of infection. Violent clashes repeatedly occurred in the United States in autumn. Many Latinos and African Americans fought for their economic existence during a deep recession. Trump lost the presidential election against Joe Biden. The new president initiated an immediate change in policy towards international cooperation and multilateralism and took over the pandemic control measures that had been successful in Europe and Asia.

### **In all central realms of life the question of quality of life has been posed anew.**

A European research team succeeded in developing a vaccine in 2021. American and European pharmaceutical companies rushed to produce the vaccine, which was made available to all countries worldwide. The WHO and other UN agencies implemented country-specific vaccination programmes. Simultaneously, the EU began implementing a €1 trillion package of measures to

cushion the economic consequences of the pandemic and stimulate the domestic economy. One of the priorities was the development of green technologies.

At the end of 2022, the WHO and OECD presented the first robust report assessing the crisis management of selected countries. Countries that had chosen a mix of science-based risk management, targeted economic aid, broad health and social protection for their populations, substantial investment and economic stimulus programmes and international cooperation got through the crisis best. At the same time, the “Corona Papers” were published in The Guardian, showing that the infection and death numbers in China were much higher than reported, that the outbreak had been covered-up for a long time and that data from the Chinese tracing app was systematically used to monitor citizens. Dramatic reports of setbacks and side effects of the crisis management in countries like Brazil and Russia also piled-up.

### **Creatives, scientists, public intellectuals, and entrepreneurs launched campaigns under the motto “A New Golden Age for Europe”.**

In the parliamentary elections in Germany, France, Italy and Spain between 2021 and 2023, populist parties massively lost support because they had not contributed any confidence-inspiring and practical ideas for dealing with the coronavirus crisis. Instead, broad centre-left alliances prevailed, focussed primarily on social and environmental themes. The 2024 European election campaign was marked by a fundamental debate on values: creatives, scientists, public intellectuals, and entrepreneurs launched Europe-wide campaigns under the motto “A New Golden Age for Europe”, which emphasised the value of democratic societies and transnational cooperation. They compared the management of the pandemic to the rebuilding efforts of the post-war time between 1950-1970.



## SCENARIO 2

# Varieties of Localism

## The World in 2025

Five years after the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, the local and regional level have gained relevance throughout Europe. People are focusing on their immediate social environment and are becoming increasingly engaged in cooperatives and communal organisations. For most people, the quality of life is determined locally – for better or for worse.

This focus on thinking and acting locally means different things in different local communities. Wealthy cities and communities have come out of the coronavirus pandemic strong, whereas the vulnerable are becoming more vulnerable. Strong regions had confidently declared the primacy of the local level already in the year 2021 and proclaimed themselves as “corona-free zones”. Some of these cities and municipalities have joined forces and forged national and even global networks and alliances. National decisions are increasingly being called into question, separatist tendencies are roaring. Regional identities become more important.

In some communities, voices that promote human rights, diversity and the fight against exploitation have gained the upper hand. In these communities, cooperative farmland is cultivated and urban gardening projects are mushrooming. Who belongs to a community is not determined by race, origin, belief, or sexual orientation. In other communities, right-wing conservatives have established themselves. Similar groups throughout Europe join the “Home and Tradition Network”, also known as HAT. Their ideal is the segregated, ethnically homogenous local community. They call it “ethnopluralism”. In many communities everyday political life is dominated by the conflict between these two worldviews. Petitions are used to prevent the construction of mosques,

while others on the local council manage to make land available for precisely this purpose. In cooperatives, confrontations rage about who can be admitted. The queer youth centre is struggling with hostile graffiti. Teachers have to justify to parents why they “overemphasise” one or the other perspective.

The pandemic has brought local issues to the fore, but it has by no means solved the problems of societies. Only the space of confrontation has been redefined.

## What happened

At the beginning of the pandemic, local aid and self-help initiatives were booming. Neighborhoods began to organise themselves in chat groups and on online platforms. The focus on regional products and local engagement and involvement grew. As the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic reached Europe, these processes of organisation were already practised and solidified. Local cooperatives became more popular. People began to demand more direct democracy.





Measures to fight the pandemic – closing day-care centres and schools, hygiene concepts for restaurants, regulating visits at elderly homes – were almost entirely decided at local level.

With a stronger focus on the local level, the debate about the right way of living together also shifted to this level. Local struggles became sharper and harder. The campaign #LeaveNoOneBehind received enormous support in left-wing and liberal circles as early as 2020. The campaign focused on saving refugees from camps in southern Europe, where the coronavirus had devastating consequences. In the following months, cities and municipalities all over Europe joined this cause. As many national interior ministers were incapable of taking the decision if to accept more refugees, individual regions and communities took the lead.

In these regions and communities, the ideals of local resilience and an open and liberal society went hand in hand. This became particularly clear in 2021. The second wave of the pandemic predominantly hit groups in society that had already

been underprivileged: migrant workers in slaughterhouses, people living in high-rise housing projects who could not retreat to their home offices. The reaction of many local communities was solidarity. The narrative of a better life, a more just economy and an end to exploitation and racism appealed to many.

However, the second wave of the 2021 pandemic also strengthened the counter-argument. Already during the first wave, a national interpretation of the pandemic had spread in right-wing circles. Local and regional resilience turned into xenophobic and racist resentment. Foreign workers were stigmatized as “virus carriers”, which must be removed from local communities. Fearsome local events were shared via digital media. Videos of alleged looting in the French banlieues were circulated. Intellectuals of the New Right were able to pick up on old ideas about local ethnically homogenous communities. Podcasts, in which people philosophised about the “return to simplicity”, the “normal family”, and local resistance won more and more listeners.

### SCENARIO 3

## Radical Individualism

### The World in 2025

The coronavirus pandemic has claimed over 10 million lives. While during the first wave nation states had still been considered the most important authority for health and economic crisis management, they lost the confidence of their populations and most of their room for fiscal manoeuvre after the outbreak of further waves.

Trust in collective systems has been eroded. The very concept of “society” is considered naive. It is replaced by highly individualised physical and digital gated communities. People who call for solidarity and collective solutions are branded

as extremists. Solidarity-based public services that go beyond market-organised services are considered dubious by most people.

For most people the concept of the Good Life is equivalent to the realisation of their own interests. Addressing unequal starting positions is considered to be encroaching – an unreasonable restriction on the free development of the individual.

Public services have been transformed into privately organised systems. There is hardly any direct contact between citizens and state institutions. Politicians emphasise the personal responsibility



of citizens. Most decisions are left to the individual, even if they have consequences for society as a whole.

The state hardly plays a role in the economy any more. Companies may (and must) organise themselves. The economic effects of further waves of infections have put companies and employees under massive pressure. Most companies have drastically reduced their investments and their commitment to society as a whole. Investment in research and development is reserved for large companies, as there is a lack of state funding and medium-sized companies are regarded as uncertain investments by financial market actors. It is also the big superstar companies that win the most public contracts to provide a minimum set of government services. There is no public support for state-funded basic research.

Following the mantra of “My Country First” during the crisis, there was no return to solidarity and cooperative approaches in international relations. The ideal of a principled global order is articulated only by a handful of countries. Cooperation exists only in those areas that are absolutely necessary to guarantee citizens’ freedoms (e.g. visa regulations). Countries that keep on funding collective approaches are ill-reputed by the “League of Free

Nations”. At the same time, foreign private companies, often from countries with dirigiste economic policies, exert great influence on the provision of public goods and services, especially in Europe.

## What Happened

After the restrictions were relaxed in many places, a second outbreak of the pandemic overwhelmed western societies in autumn 2020, causing numerous deaths. Hastily introduced strict lockdowns led to numerous protests, as the populations doubted their long-term effectiveness. State intervention in everyday life was rejected by more and more people. This sentiment was taken up by centrist parties. The loss of confidence was personified in the spring of 2021, when leading virologists in several countries had to admit scientific sloppiness. Since government measures could guarantee neither health, prosperity nor freedom, the anger of many people exploded into mass protests in the summer of 2021 under the slogan #Summer-OfFreedom. These protests were the breeding ground for the success of libertarian positions in many elections.

In winter 2022, it became clear that the European Commission’s ambitious plans for a pan-European economic recovery programme would not find a majority among the heads of state and government. While in some member states the debt levels skyrocketed, in others the narrative gained the upper hand, that one should part with underperforming partners before being exploited. The European and global supranational structures were hollowed out and hardly ever used politically. Also because national governments had little support left in their countries for the idea of a strong state.

Only in the summer of 2024, was a vaccine finally available. The vaccine was initially given to those parts of the population that had demonstrably made an economic contribution in recent years and whose human capital could be expected to make a positive net economic contribution in the future.

## SCENARIO 4

**Welfare Technocracy****The World in 2025**

The contrast in crisis management during the coronavirus pandemic could have not been greater. In economically liberal and socially conservative countries such as the United States, Great Britain and Brazil, the virus has claimed the most lives. In contrast, the efficient countries of East Asia contained the pandemic without any major damages to life and limb, nor to the economy. China has attempted to use “mask diplomacy” to gain propaganda benefits from its comparatively effective crisis management, but the response in the recipient countries has been mixed. The prevalent view is that the democracies of Taiwan, South Korea, Germany and Japan, with their well-developed healthcare systems and competent bureaucracies, have managed the crisis best. Even upper-middle classes are questioning whether health systems should be organised according to market principles. Many people consider the maxim of profit and the provision of public goods to be incompatible. In Spain, the health system is nationalised. The French President promises to reverse efforts to privatise public services.

The much better crisis management in East Asia has triggered a debate about values in Europe. While the East Asians wore masks to protect others, many rejected this “small gesture of solidarity” in the individualistic West. There are more and more voices calling on citizens to make a contribution to the community and to conscientiously fulfil the role societies have assigned to them. This new collectivism is perceived by others as a restriction on self-realisation. Marginalised groups and minorities are increasingly being attacked under the guise of rationality and society’s quest for greater homogeneity. Civil rights organisations denounce the fact that the idea of the common

good is used to silence critics and to restrict the freedom of press, opinion and art. This increases polarisation and tensions in society.

Government action is determined by evidence and competence. Expert commissions play a major role. Recognised positions in society are filled relatively meritocratically, creating incentives for higher education and academic excellence. Scientists are actively involved in political decision-making. However, critical voices within science that question the basic assumptions of politically propagated “rational action” are systematically excluded from scientific discourse. Marginalised groups are systematically bypassed when expert groups and decision-makers are appointed.

National governments ensure macroeconomic stability and determine the broad direction of economic transformations. But not in the way of a planned economy. The state sets incentives through fiscal and industrial policy, but does not micro-manage. However, the system is vulnerable



## **Critical voices in science and media remain marginalised Societal polarisation is a constant factor of uncertainty.**

to lobbyists. As a result, the government is more competent, but the most powerful groups continue to use the system for their own interests. Thus, the conflict between climate and economic policy has not been resolved, but is intensified by the greater influence of science. The ever stronger climate movement is allowed into the debate and considered in decision making processes, but representatives of the traditionally strong industries often find a more sympathetic ear among the technocrats in their struggle for subsidies.

Driven by the vision of early pandemic detection and the containment of potential outbreaks, governments have invested massively in the expansion of digital infrastructures. To this end, principles of data protection and informational self-determination have been softened again and again.

The living conditions of the average citizen have improved noticeably through the expansion of social services and public infrastructure. The fear of being abandoned is no longer present for the average citizen. More control over coexistence and stronger local communities have dried out right-wing populists' breeding ground. At the same time, a more and more homogeneous idea of what it means to live a "regular life" has pushed alternative life plans into a niche existence. Critical voices in science and media remain marginalised. Societal polarisation is a constant factor of uncertainty.

### **What happened**

In the years 2020 and 2021, the effects of a botched pandemic response could be observed in the USA, but also in Brazil and the United Kingdom. In addition to the failed crisis management, the economic turmoil and escalating conflicts within

society cost the US president his job. The pandemic rolled through the Global South in ever new waves.

The struggles over distributing the crisis' costs reached a peak in 2021. All feelings of solidarity had vanished. In Italy and Greece, mass protests erupted in violent resistance to attempts to consolidate the shattered state finances through austerity programs. Shoutings were heard across the political camps that the state must step in with investments.

Populists won the 2022 elections in many countries that wanted to get out of the crisis. At the same time, the deterrent images from populist-ruled countries and the success of expert-led measures strengthened the major centre-left and centre-right parties in Western Europe. They regained the space and confidence of citizens that they can "deliver for them". In many elections people casted their ballot based on values of tradition, security, and national sovereignty. To stop the economic downward spiral and the populist revolt, European countries and the United States began to invest in their thinned-out public and social infrastructure.

Most analysts agreed that China was leading the way in future technologies through clever industrial and research policies. The economic, ideological, but also military confrontation between competitors for global hegemony intensified. With the conclusion of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), China created an economic zone that excluded the United States. The United States responded by creating a free trade zone between the Americas and United Kingdom. The European economy was increasingly excluded from both blocs. By 2024 at the latest, Europe felt the consequences of its technological dependence. The European economy was no longer competitive. Thus, the European Commission created a Directorate-General for Industrial Policy and allocated substantial resources to research and development. Germany was discussing the need for "Prussian reforms" in education, science and administration to catch up.



## SCENARIO 5

**National Populism****The World in 2025**

Most Western societies face serious economic and social distortions. Unemployment is high, austerity is radical. Situational lockdowns to combat the now mutated coronavirus are the rule, as developing an effective vaccine and distributing it fairly on a global scale has proved much more difficult than expected in 2020. This is partly due to national 'go-it-alone' attempts in dealing with the pandemic, as well as companies and industries acting nationally.

**In most Western societies an authoritarian, illiberal understanding of the state prevails.**

An authoritarian "communitarianism" based on national solidarity and ethnically connotated social policy, as first practised in Central and Eastern Europe by Orbán, Kaczyński and others, has found further supporters and imitators. In most Western societies, solidarity is now only practiced in relation to clearly defined sections of the population. An authoritarian and illiberal concept of the state prevails in most Western societies. Sometimes in the form of a "leftist" anti-globalisation populism, but mostly in the form of a conservative, nativist populism.

In countries such as the Netherlands, on the other hand, it takes the form of a libertarian, "radical-emancipatory" populism in the tradition of Fortuyn and Wilders. What they all have in common is that, beyond elections and the demagogic use of direct democracy instruments, there is hardly any political participation in the form of positive citizenship rights by groups and individuals. State and democracy no longer function as a participatory form of social self-organisation.



Economically, most states have taken on a strong, protectionist role. There is a dominance of libertarian and social Darwinistic or social-nationalistic principles – with the common denominator of "national populism". Universalistic, human rights-oriented positions regarding migration and refugee policy and the liberalism of open borders have practically disappeared. They have been replaced by a narrative that propagates national self-determination, the primacy of national interests, isolation and restrictive, one-sidedly "utilitarian" economic migration.

**There has been a rollback into the parochial. The Good Life takes place at home, not in the world.**

There has been a rollback into the parochial. The Good Life takes place at home, not in the world. Ideas of community, one's native land, neighbourliness and family dominate social concepts and understanding of roles.

A continuing crisis in the media landscape has led to a further weakening of press and media freedom. Liberal media are increasingly delegitimised and intimidated.

At national level, the leaders are Ivanka Trump, Marine Le Pen and Matteo Salvini. Erdogan, Putin, Orban and Kaczynski are strengthened. Brexit remains unfinished. China has become the hegemon of a populist-authoritarian world order. The integration of the EU has come to a standstill because the member states are paralysing each other; there are disintegration tendencies. The WHO is de facto dead, as most states have stopped funding.

## What happened

In the course of 2020, unemployment rose massively in many countries. Vaccine development was delayed and the coronavirus mutated. In winter, favoured by the weather as well as the spread of the virus in South America and Africa over the summer months, the number of cases rose dramatically again in the USA and Europe. Donald Trump, who had repeatedly prolonged the national emergency, was re-elected under chaotic conditions and curfews in individual states.

The efforts of many governments in 2021 to overcome the recession through state interventionist measures, renationalisation as well as protecting national industries from bankruptcies and takeovers, did not work. The result was impoverishment, especially in Southern Europe. In Spain, the left-wing government fell after massive protests and was replaced by a coalition of the conservative PP and the ultra-right VOX. The dispute over the EU's ambitious reconstruction plan escalated and led to serious distortions. The Commission's proposal on the financial framework for a European way out of the crisis, which had initially been saved by Angela Merkel's efforts to reach a compromise, also failed in 2021 due to a lack of approval from the national parliaments.

## Conservative and right-wing populist parties dominated the super election year 2023, the disintegration of social democracy continued.

International observers described the situation in Europe as a new phase of "Eurosclerosis": self-paralysis and passive aggression between the various camps. In Italy, a government under Matteo Salvini replaced the technocratic government of Mario Monti. Marine Le Pen prevailed over Emmanuel Macron in the run-off vote for the French presidency by making it a referendum on crisis management and the "European naivety" of her predecessor. The French election campaign, like in the Netherlands in 2021 and in other European countries, took place under the massive influence of disinformation and manipulation, particularly on the part of China and Russia. In the super election year 2023, conservative and right-wing populist parties prevailed in eight out of nine national elections in Europe – with the exception of Portugal – and the disintegration of social democracy continued. State intervention in press freedom, repression and targeted delegitimation by politicians, as well as the continuing weakening of their economic base, led to a decline in press freedom. Various renowned newspapers disappeared from the market.

The circumstances surrounding Le Pen's inaugural visit to the White House were much more positive than those in Brussels. Le Pen's extensive talks with Ivanka Trump fuelled rumours about the candidacy of the daughter of US President. In fact, Ivanka Trump won the 2024 election campaign against recently-turned 35 year old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and was sworn in in 2025.



## SCENARIO 6

# School Trip

## The World in 2025

The economic and social conditions as well as the state of international relations largely correspond to the state of the world in summer 2019. The pandemic remains a small episode in the memories of contemporaries, a superficial external shock. The economically better off remember the pandemic as a kind of long school trip. You were locked up together. Some rules were suspended. Teachers would tell you when to go to your rooms and what to do next. But when you got off the coach everything was back to normal.

## What happened

A vaccine was available at the end of 2020, and a second wave of the pandemic did not occur. The global economy suffered a short, severe crisis in 2021. In summer 2022, the global output was at pre-crisis levels. Although global trade was curtailed directly after the pandemic, financial flows were hardly severed and economic globalisation continued. Pre-crisis social inequalities largely remained. While people lost their jobs, essential workers feared for their health, and many fell into poverty, the well-educated and better-offs were less affected. Not only were they able to work from home and had access to medical treatment, they also disproportionately profited from economic stimulus packages and the governments' support. Meanwhile, daily economic struggle and individualism prevented the disadvantaged within Western societies from developing a feeling of unity or a movement for change in the face of widening inequality. With the reawakening of social life and the rebounding of the economy, many regained hope for a return to the old world, slowly but steadily closing the window of opportunity for progressive reform.

The examples of centrist governments successfully fighting the pandemic with prudence and constraint appealed to the population's increased risk aversion and its longing for security. The state of exception took a toll on people, many just wanted to go back to pre-crisis "normality". Conservative politicians were elected for propagating in-group solidarity and a reliable and predictable style of governing. At the same time, the left did not succeed in creating a convincing narrative for all and right-wing populists around the globe showcased their incompetence to deal with crises – leading to losses for both at the ballot boxes. Nonetheless, conflicts around identity and values reemerged within society. A majority still considers themselves to be beneficiaries of existing practices and feels threatened by progressive forces as well as by the inextricable complexity of the world. In this atmosphere of divisiveness, the chances of developing a new vision for society diminish and a political mandate for change is out of reach.



The pandemic did not become a geopolitical turning point. The incompetence of its response did hurt the United States' soft power, but the balance of hard power favoring the United States has not been changed by the pandemic. Although China provided aid and engaged in propaganda to manipulate the narrative of its response to the pandemic, China's effort to expand its soft power was met by skepticism in Europe and elsewhere. The strategic pressure from Western countries,

the US in particular, on the leadership of China increased. Budgetary constraints, partly due to massive investment needs in the health sector, forced China to slow down its military investments. Attempts to substantially reform the EU towards further fiscal, social, and political integration failed. Most of the developing countries managed to contain the pandemic, but the impact of lock-downs slowed economic development and modernisation efforts.

## **A strategy for progressives: Seizing the chance to renew our societies**

**T**he coronavirus pandemic has revealed and accelerated a variety of sometimes contradictory social, economic and cultural developments. These developments and contradictions give rise to radically different possible futures. How should progressives react to this? They must choose a strategy that on the one hand makes the future they hope for more likely, but on the other hand also prepares the ground for futures that they hope will not come to pass. The strategy outlined here attempts to formulate what progressives should agree on today. It aims to provide the first milestones for a progressive debate about the future. It is a blueprint to be discussed with other progressives. It is an invitation to take bold steps into the public debate with political competitors, but also to form alliances between parties. The essence of this strategy can be described by four key terms: Democracy, Transformation, Europe+ and Leadership.

### **Safeguarding and innovating our democratic system**

#### **More Democracy is needed, especially in times of crises**

At the moment everyone is focusing on national governments. It is becoming apparent that a democratically accountable executive and a critical

public sphere do not make a country's crisis response less effective. On the contrary: democratic responses to crises, achieved transparently and through deliberative processes, are in fact more efficient in the long-term. Democratic crisis management is better crisis management. Nevertheless, progressives must go beyond the logic of merely comparing different systems based on their instrumental benefits: they must not only be in favour of democracy when it proves to be the more efficient system (see scenario Welfare Technocracy, p. 11). For progressives, democracy and the defence of individual freedoms define the path – and at the same time the goal – of a society of the free and the equal. This is especially true in times of crisis. A society of the free and the equal can only be realised if those who do not have a strong and organised voice also are involved in the democratic process.

#### **Progressives must become advocates of the public space**

During the coronavirus crisis, encounters in public spaces have drastically decreased. But even in previous years, public spaces where society comes together across social and cultural lines have come under pressure (see scenario Radical Individualism, p. 9). However, public spaces – be they day care centres or schools, marketplaces,

pubs or choral societies – are a central prerequisite for democracy and social cohesion. Democracy needs the encounter and confrontation of the different – and is therefore fundamentally dependent on public space. We must do a lot to ensure that digital spaces also become public spaces. And at the same time, we are now realising ever more clearly that democracy needs physical encounters and must look at people as human beings in their entirety. It is up to progressives to defend public spaces and to fight for its inclusiveness and quality. This includes expanding the role of urban and rural neighbourhoods as central places for social coexistence and experimentation with possible futures (see scenario Varieties of Localism, p. 8).

### **Without integrative and representative media the project of liberal democracy fails**

Media in all its diversity is a defining factor for the public space. Especially in crisis situations, media that can claim a minimum of quality, representativeness and inclusiveness are needed (see Scenario National Populism, p. 13). There is no way back to the old world of a public discourse shaped by legacy media. At the same time, the last few years have shown how a fragmented media landscape dominated by radically shortened attention cycles makes debates about society as a whole incredibly difficult. Progressive politicians must react to this and find answers together. Models that are neither state nor purely private, but oriented towards the public interest, can play a crucial role here. It is a central task of progressive politics to shape the media world of the digital age.

### **Only a democratic understanding of science is a progressive understanding of science**

Progressives are committed to reason and empiricism. Without solid scientific evidence and advice, politics would simply be unable to respond to the current situation. But progressives' insistence on reason should not get in the way of an open

debate on scientific evidence. Progress depends on scientific controversies and on scientists clearly identifying uncertainties and fluctuation margins of future prognoses. The question of which society we want to live in cannot be answered by science (see scenario Welfare Technocracy, p. 11). The place for societal decision-making is politics. Progressives should encourage broad debates on scientific finding, aiming at societal progress.

## **Pushing for a just and sustainable transformation**

### **Shaping the economic restart towards more equality, sustainability and technological progress**

In the past months many countries have been rescuing and supporting companies that fell into economic distress due to the pandemic. This is a form of solidarity in society. Progressives must derive a clear commitment from this: If the public is helping out the private sector in times of acute crisis, using substantial resources, private sector actors are obliged to make every effort to modernize our economies in the most encompassing sense. Progressives must advocate that rescue and economic stimulus measures provide strong incentives for an ecologically sustainable economy, a more equal distribution of wealth, future-ready business models and a general improvement in quality of life (see scenario New Golden Age, p. 6). Progressives must make the case for an economy that is as dynamic and tech-savvy as it is inclusive and sustainable.

### **Flatten the curve II: An ambitious and democratic climate policy**

The measures taken in many countries to tackle the pandemic have shown how decisive societies can act when they have to. According to opinion polls, citizens accept restrictions to their daily lives in emergency situations. However, it would be wrong to conclude that in view of the real and possibly even greater threat posed to us by the climate crisis, a “next round” of rigid restrictions

on individual freedoms should be initiated. We must act on the climate crisis now in the most decisive manner, while safeguarding democracy and freedom.

### **A genuine appreciation of services vital to our societies**

The past few weeks have shown which professions societies particularly depend on in times of crisis. Politicians and citizens have expressed their appreciation for those people who bear the brunt in emergency situations. But progressives need to do more than airing general statements of sympathy and goodwill towards our fellow citizens working in these professions. They must address the tough and sometimes uncomfortable questions of distribution. They must fight for a genuine upgrading of professions that are so fundamental to the stability of our societies (see scenario New Golden Age, p. 6). This means strengthening the public sector, reversing the privatisation of public services, particularly in the health sector, and not shying away from the issue of a just labour income share. These issues, in combination with a reform of the service economy explicitly taking into account people who lost out in past transformations, should form one of the central progressive projects of the coming years.

### **Solidarity between generations**

Most likely, the so-called “Generation Corona” will be identifiable in the labour market statistics of many countries for a long time. Young people entering the labour market today have poor short-term prospects and thus are carrying a particular burden. At the same time, the willingness of many people to show mutual solidarity is currently high. Progressives must take advantage of this situation and formulate a programme to ensure fair life chances for the coming generation – from guaranteed education and training to a credible promise of a reliable pension. The progressive welfare state of the future is one that takes away fear, provides protection and cohesion, and enables people to take control of their own lives.

## **Making a progressive case for Europe+ and a new era of multilateralism**

### **Defend and restart Europe as a multilateral project**

In times of national isolation, progressives must fight with all their power for Europe as a multilateral project. In many places the initial response to the pandemic was to shut borders. All countries seemed to be shutting themselves off. In the past weeks though, many people are once again realising that Europeans are stronger united. This unity, however, requires a genuine fiscal union and much bolder steps towards a political and social union – otherwise Europe as a multilateral project will fail, sooner or later (see scenario Radical Individualism, p. 10). The European Central Bank will not be able to bridge economic – and thus also social – divergences forever. European progressives have to face the fact that the continent is in actual danger of falling behind economically: Europe's sovereignty in the digital transformation – from cloud providers to components for mobile networks to media platforms – is seriously threatened. A progressive agenda for Europe must be about unlocking the enormous treasure that united action, solidarity and cooperation represent.

### **Reforming structural policy and championing public goods**

The escalation of geopolitical conflicts between major powers is promoting global disintegration into economic blocs and zones of influence. The coronavirus crisis is accelerating this development. As a result, the European market is becoming increasingly important for the economies of Europe. Only a dynamic economy throughout Europe can secure living standards. Progressives must deal with issues of European economic and structural policy more intensively than before and – building on the Recovery Fund and the Green New Deal – develop transnational strategies. For example, an ambitious common European

productivity policy is missing. The potential for increasing prosperity and security across Europe through the creation of European public goods – from climate change mitigation to digital sovereignty or large and risky research projects – is considerable. The question of how a coronavirus vaccine will be distributed once it is available could demonstrate how serious Europeans are about public goods – potentially once again strengthening the continent's soft power.

### Going beyond austerity

The ongoing discussion about a European Recovery Fund shows that the logic of austerity has lost support in political and economic circles in wake of the current crisis. A conviction is gaining ground that only courageous state intervention has a stabilising effect – irrespective of public debt. At the same time, the current crisis has once again highlighted the pressure to which democracies, societies and economies in southern Europe have been exposed to by the long-standing policy of austerity. In changed geopolitical conditions, a continuation of this policy would have fatal political and economic consequences for Europe. Even if turning away austerity brings new problems: Progressives must assert themselves against national populist voices and formulate a pan-European strategy of prosperity that gains legitimacy in all member states (see scenario National Populism, p. 13).

### A clear commitment to international cooperation

There is no doubt that the world would have been better off in the coronavirus pandemic if the World Health Organisation had been stronger and if there had been more international cooperation. The more the ideology of “My Country First” spreads, the more clearly progressives must commit themselves to international cooperation. Progressives must advocate for a strengthening and modernisation of those institutions of international cooperation, many of which are currently under fire. Similar to post war times, new international

organisations must be created to foster multilateralism and global unity. This holds true especially for the relations of Western societies with the Global South. Africa will be particularly hard hit by the coronavirus crisis and Europeans in particular have a special obligation to support and partner with African countries. Similarly, North America has a special responsibility for Latin America. Now is the time to fulfil this obligation; for example through providing vaccines (see scenario New Golden Age, p. 6).

## Winning the public argument and building capacities to govern

### Leading the discursive change

Recent events have shown how important it is for a state to be capable of acting. The approval of state action has increased. The economic discourse is changing. In many countries the ideological hegemony of deregulation and “there is no alternative” is coming under pressure. Issues of how to run an economy and how to distribute resources are once again on the agenda. In other words: There is a window of opportunity for progressives that they must take advantage of. This is the time to bring fundamental questions of distribution and the role of the state to the centre of public debate. Progressive leadership means to determinedly promote a more active role for the state – a paradigm shift which will not happen overnight but is crucial to the cause.

### Offering concrete utopias

In recent years, progressives have secured some gains in forming narratives. Still missing are real life signature projects based on a clear analysis of social groups willing to support them. Between small-scale technocracy and abstract debates on virtue, there has been a lack of well-designed “visions to touch” that whet the appetite within the broad centre of society for a progressive transformation. Progressives must tell stories of a desirable future – be it a European railway network or continent-wide free wifi. That future must be



concrete in a way that people want to subscribe to those who promise to make this future a credible reality.

### **Championing an integrative and problem-oriented style of governing**

In these months of crisis response, citizens in many countries have been able to observe an surprisingly pragmatic way of how governments and administrations can work. The model of “pillared responsibilities” and “muddling through” have been suspended. Instead, quick and pragmatic solutions were found across all levels of government. Progressives should put themselves at the forefront of those who want to take this more integrative and agile form of governing from the crisis and into a “new normality”. Progressives have to stand for a new style of governance that puts citizens’ problems before departmental logics.

Progressive must credibly represent this kind of governance and demonstrate leadership skills to bring it about.

### **Governing transparently to build trust**

There are many forces that willingly destroy faith in the very model of a democracy. At the same time, we can observe in some countries the consequences of non-transparent communication. Progressives must regain confidence in democracy through their style of government. Being transparent by facing debates and admitting mistakes. By explaining complex matters comprehensibly, providing real-life examples, and using simple language. Progressives must be the ones that engage citizens through new forms of participation. Progressive governance has to stand out as more deliberative, more collaborative, and more participatory.

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**M**any parameters will influence how societies will appear after the coronavirus crisis. Some of them are out of our control. Even more so it is crucial that progressives win the fight of how to interpret the crisis and the challenges it is revealing. Only then will there be a chance for more democracy, a new economic order and a restart of the multilateral project. Further polarisation of societies must be stopped. This will only work if we can activate and inspire the centre of society to collaborate on a worthwhile future. Progressives need to embark on leading the renewal of our society out of the crisis. This will not be possible without a network between countries, and also across party lines. And this is exactly the purpose of the Progressive Governance Digital Summit 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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## Progressive Governance Digital Summit 2020

The coronavirus pandemic and its aftershocks will



be one of the most serious challenges of our lifetime. A return to normality as we know it appears unlikely. As we move from crisis management to rebuilding the economy and society, a momentum for change is growing. To move forward, progressives need to learn from the lessons of these significant societal and economic shifts and the unforetold challenges that lie ahead of us, while contextualising them within the themes and values progressives hold dear. This is the purpose of the Progressive Governance Digital Summit. In 30+ sessions PGS20 will give up to 100 thinkers, leaders advisors and activists from all over Europa and North America a platform to rejuvenate the progressive spirit and create ideas for shaping the future.

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