

## *A new beginning for democracy.*

### *Rejecting the politics of fear in favour of a politics of hope*

*We too have yet to shake off the sense of horror we feel at the outcome of the recent elections – and the events of recent months more generally. Yet what seems like a landslide for the right, for the deprivation of rights and for violence is, on closer inspection, actually an indicator of polarisation, holding out the prospect of a politicisation of European (and other) societies. As is so often the case, this seems most within reach elsewhere: in southern Europe, far away in the US, even in the UK. Yet the pendulum could swing to the left in Germany, too – and we believe it could do so far more strongly and rapidly than many consider possible.*

*The proposal we outline below initially concerns the period until the next Bundestag elections in the autumn of 2017. We suggest that the election campaign should mark the beginning of a process of politicisation, one which is not primarily about political parties and their candidates or drumming up votes for others; instead, it should be about the joint programme and, moreover, the joint project of a left-wing awakening in society, a left-wing pole in society. We suggest that we should develop this programme and project, in a spirit of solidarity, in a process emanating from within society, taking place across society, and intended for this society. And we suggest that this process should begin in local political forums, from the bottom up and cutting across the political groups in which we are involved, and in which most of us will continue to be politically active. The focus on the autumn of 2017 is only an initial time limit, because this is not just about developing a joint left-wing project, but about making it a reality: a genuine revolution in our society brought about by its social and environmental transformation. That is why the joint work in which we are inviting you to join us will span the next ten years.*

The world is changing, radically and at a speed no one could have foreseen. As is so often the case, the new has been accompanied by horrifying events. For example, last year an arson attack was carried out on a shelter for refugees every third day, on average: attempted murder in countless cases. While in election after election the far right is being voted into parliament, the political centre has no better idea of how to respond than to join the drift to the right, going so far as to openly breach international law in the disgraceful deal with the Turkish regime.

One thing has been made clear by this change: there is no truth in the popular narrative that the era of ideology is over and that modern politics is neither right-wing nor left-wing, but rather “objective” and “pragmatic”. Moreover: this narrative itself was and is ideological. It was and is the narrative of those who want to counter the transformations taking place in this world with policies that minimise change – and at the same time want to feel good about themselves and tell themselves that they are on the right side, beyond the “old”, “failed”, supposedly “disastrous” rhetoric and practices employed by “starry-eyed idealists”, or worse, “class warriors”. Despite how often we have heard this message: it is wrong and misleading. The first lesson of the change confronting us is simply that right and left are the two poles of the political spectrum, and as such are not interchangeable. The centre, if there is any such thing, will ultimately belong to one pole or the other. That does not mean, however, that we can be indifferent to what is taking place there – on the contrary.

## **Right and left**

The right-wing world stokes fear, sows hatred, preaches violence, supports inequality, seals itself off and shuts others out. In the right-wing world, the people, politicians and “statesmen” can come up with no better response to the migration flows from the poorer regions of the world, caused partly by the rich countries, than to offer a diagnosis of “excessive migration” (David Cameron) and to call for arbitrary “upper limits” (Horst Seehofer) and the repressive protection of Europe’s “cultural identity” (Viktor Orbán). In the right-wing world, the aim is for the rich to remain rich while the poor remain poor, for the “educated” to retain their privileged position while the “uneducated” stay put – the social order must be preserved and the market allowed to operate without hindrance. This is supposed to be to the benefit of “all” – if all goes well, or in other words provided that the poor do not become too rich or the “uneducated” too rebellious. In the right-wing world, existing economic inequalities “reflect performance”, gender equality is “unnatural”, warnings of environmental risks are “overblown”, and demands for emancipation are regarded at best as “inappropriate” but more honestly as “impertinent”. These attitudes unite them all: right-wing populists and neoliberals, Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the Initiative New Social Market Economy, the Höckes and the Henkels of this world.

The left-wing world counters the right’s authoritarian discourse on prosperity, security and freedom with a very different, diametrically opposed vision of what constitutes a good society – and very different, completely contrary practices with regard to social action. In recognition of the fact that Europe and the Global North are partially responsible for the

hardship experienced by the Global South, in the left-wing world international solidarity is at the top of the political and social agenda. In the left-wing world, a battle is taking place against the prevailing politics of fear in favour of a politics of hope. In the left-wing world, a social infrastructure which allows everyone equal access to the goods regarded by society as necessary and valuable allows a multiplicity of voices to be heard and diversity to flourish. And in this world, preventing an environmental catastrophe is not a question of prices and “homeland security”, but rather a human right and a human obligation.

## Now us

Left versus right, good versus bad: isn't that all a bit simplistic? The answer is: yes and no. Yes, of course the social world is infinitely more complicated, especially on a global scale. But at the end of the day, as we grapple on a daily basis with shaping our society and the concrete forms that our coexistence takes, what it comes down to are clearly contrasting, competing visions of society. The right has no problems with engaging in “horrifying simplification” – on the contrary, that is its lifeblood. The left must counter this with a hopeful simplification, a simplification which gets to the heart of civic life; it must counter the right's social chauvinism by advancing the left's ideal and practice of an open, egalitarian and emancipatory society. Between these two visions lies the seemingly only “pragmatic” management of the status quo, the “crisis management” which will continue trying to portray itself as – given its “pragmatism” – the “reasonable” authority responsible for supposedly “balancing out the extremes”.

It is important to note that there are rightists everywhere – in politics and academia, in civil society and social movements. There are also rightists in the Social Democratic Party, among the Greens and in the Left Party. There are rightists among German citizens as well as immigrants and refugees; among men, women and all other genders. Anyone who finds this surprising should take a closer look, and anyone who is particularly “appalled” by this in relation to certain groups is generally motivated by right-wing intentions.

Leftists, for their part, are not found solely on the left, or in groups and organisations which expressly identify as being left-wing. People who have left-leaning tendencies without necessarily being “leftists” can be found in the broad group of the political undecideds, the first and perhaps even the most important group which must be convinced to reject the politics of fear in favour of a politics of hope.

The left-wing world is therefore potentially attractive to many people who – in line with the prevailing discourse – regard themselves as “neither right-wing nor left-wing”, who claim to be “apolitical”. Yet claiming to be “apolitical” is itself a political statement, a political attitude, even a political act. Discovering the political in the apolitical and drawing it into the left-wing world: that is perhaps the biggest task facing us today. Finally embarking on this task will also involve a fundamental change in the left-wing world: its transformation into a world in which there is a place for many worlds. Organised work on this world's joint programme and project, in which we are inviting you to join us and which is already under way in many places, will be a vital step towards this goal. While at present this work is a matter for just a

few people, for a minority, it may with surprising speed – and really, why not? – become a matter for a majority: the crucial majority.

Of course, our joint project is taking shape firstly in the ongoing debates in society, in concrete acts of resistance, in day-to-day activism and in professional work relating to the wide range of problem areas which exist. It is also and especially taking shape in our day-to-day interactions with those to whom we are closest and those we know less well, and in the diversity of cultural and artistic creation – in every area where people are seeking a “good life” for themselves and for all. Ultimately, however, the development of a programme and project is something we must also come together to tackle in a dedicated process – and that is what we are inviting you to join us in.

- Many of us are among the millions of people who, over a period of weeks and months, have taken and are taking action in an effort to ensure that this is a place where refugees from around the world can end their journey and where they are welcomed.
- Likewise over a period of weeks and months, many of us have stood in the path of the marches held by the “patriots” who are seeking to seal off their “Occident” from the rest of the world. From the very beginning, this has brought us up against the right-wing mob – and the murderous tendencies which drive it.
- For some of us, this was the first time that we had publicly taken sides in this way, while others are anything but new to it and have been doing so for years.
- Many of us were horrified by the developments we were seeing even before the 122 arson attacks in 2015; we were left aghast by the coldness with which the democratic awakening in Greece was blocked in the same year. The hatred directed at the refugees from Syria, Iraq, Mali or Bangladesh follows on seamlessly from the icy contempt with which not just the Greeks, but the whole of southern Europe – and ultimately all of us – have been forced into servitude in the form of unrepayable debt and endless penury.
- For many of us, solidarity with the Greek awakening was and is just a continuation of our longstanding work against almost four decades of neoliberal globalisation and neoliberal politics: against the undermining of the political sphere, against public assets being stripped down to the bone, against the equally sweeping theft of social and labour rights, and against, ultimately, our entire lives and the world in which we live being placed at the mercy of the insatiable, consuming hunger of untrammelled capital.
- Our ranks include all those who will not forget the contempt with which policy-makers completely ignored the objections to the TTIP and CETA free-trade agreements voiced first by 250,000 people, then 90,000 people a few months later, gathering first in Berlin, then in Hanover, but in countless other places as well. Our ranks therefore include all those who believe that a left-wing answer to the social question is not a matter solely for those directly affected, for the poor, for those who have been left behind or excluded, but rather a matter for us all – as an answer to

the question of what kind of world we want to live in and what does and should constitute the common good, the *volonté générale* (Rousseau), the general will of democratic politics.

- Our ranks include all those who take the view that social justice questions are universal questions of an ultimately global justice and are thus always environmental questions as well; in addition, however, these are always questions involving broad public debates and strong social movements, and which touch on our own individual lifestyles and how they relate to those of all others and to nature. In other words, these are questions concerning both social justice and freedom.
- In this respect, they are similar to the questions concerning justice and freedom between genders and between generations, as well as those concerning each and every individual's relationship with religion or, to put it slightly differently, with the modern age. The fact that these questions have long been present, but are taking on new prominence as questions for a society of immigration, makes them questions to which there can be no simple answers. Our ranks include all those who believe that the debate over these answers, which is unavoidable but will not be resolved in the foreseeable future, can only be conducted on the basis of equal rights, i.e. in recognition of the freedom of each and every individual. If "integration" is the aim, then it should be the integration of all of us into the "worldwidisation of the world" (Derrida).
- Finally, our ranks therefore include all those who know that the war on terror cannot defeat terror because that too requires another world: a world in which human dignity and universal human rights are not negotiable but instead accorded unconditionally to all, without exception, everywhere and at all times.

Precisely because of this, however, recent elections – Thuringia aside – have left us voiceless and unrepresented, despite the fact that many of us voted. To specifically discuss our own situation, that of the *Institut Solidarische Moderne* (ISM), the Institute for a Modern Age of Solidarity: many of us, perhaps most of us, voted for the parties of the centre-left or the left, although we did not always do so because we agreed with or were members of these parties; often we did so for tactical reasons. We have never believed, however, that a coalition of the SPD, the Greens and the Left Party could be the defining authority or sole framework for the crossover or mosaic of the social, environmental and democratic transformation of society that we were and are seeking. Yet we failed to articulate this strength, this transcendence of the merely party-political, in the way that was necessary: and today it is even more necessary than before. Daring to bring about a new beginning therefore includes making a fresh start with the mosaic or crossover left: finally making it a transformative left with a joint programme and project.

The reason why this is still and especially possible today is that, all together – "tous ensemble!", "alle zusammen!" – a third, more or less, of the people of this country belong to the left-wing half of the European population. We are united by our search for a politics which will make the difference between the right-wing world and a potential left-wing world:

the difference between a world of hatred, contempt and disregard, and a world of freedom, equality in freedom, and fraternity, the proof of which is in the hospitality and welcome we extend to others.

### **What action should be taken?**

As things stand, and given the sense of horror we are feeling, we are initially only talking about the time remaining until the next Bundestag election – the period from now until the autumn of 2017. We suggest that we should begin, without further delay and in a spirit of solidarity, to discuss our common ground: the joint programme and project of the welcome movement, the acts of resistance against racism, Pegida and Alternative for Germany, and the mass protests against the neoliberal precarisation of life. This project and programme will also articulate the common objectives which hundreds of thousands of people have long been working towards, both professionally and in all areas of everyday life, but also in trade unions, in social and environmental associations and, of course, in political parties. This process of politicisation will have a primarily societal focus. It will only have a party-political and parliamentary purpose in as much as it will also seek at all times to give the parties (not all, but some) a choice: the choice to face up to the need for a social and environmental transformation of this country and thus to embrace the opportunity to become part of the new beginning for our democracy. We say this without any animosity: our aim is to offer society an alternative, and the political parties will not be able to ignore it, because the development of this alternative will move this country and Europe leftwards.

### **Think globally, act locally**

Looking to Europe, the *Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25)* has not only outlined an initial plan for the path ahead, but also set a phased, ten-year timetable for achieving it. We expressly embrace the idea and the challenge of working to pave the way for the constitutional assembly of a different, democratic Europe to convene in 2025: ultimately, the new democratic beginning that we want to help bring about can only be a new European beginning. We are seeing a first response to DiEM25's initiative in the *Call for a change of course in Europe* launched by hundreds of academics, trade unionists, politicians and allies from associations and movements. Our proposal is that the ten-year timeframe which has been set should now finally be explored *at local level* and *from the bottom up*. This work will take great determination, and will require its own spaces and opportunities. We can embark on it in *political forums*, which in many places already exist, but elsewhere will have to be created.

- We have deliberately chosen the word "forum" to evoke the *Social Forums* in which the anti-globalisation movement took shape at local level and forged wider links.
- We have chosen to call them *political forums* because today – unlike at the time of the Social Forums – we have a more ambitious objective: rather than seeking recognition that another world is possible, we are now finally seeking to make that

world a reality. That is why the debates which take place in these forums – *and their primary function will be to encourage debate and establish a discourse* – will no longer be simply a free exchange of views, but instead seek to reach and record results; these debates will be about the project of the social and environmental transformation of our society.

- Instead of political forums, we could have chosen the term *round tables*, evoking the deliberations in which the civil-rights activists of the former GDR and beyond worked together on their joint programme and project and likewise brought about a revolution in society.
- Equally, however, we are deliberately not talking about setting up political associations or a new political organisation; we are not talking about things like statutes, memberships and executive committees – or about representatives and representative bodies. We need commitment, reliability and determination; what we don't need, however, is to waste time on organisational minutiae, whether at local level or more widely. Our aim is a joint educational process in the widest sense of the word, not bureaucracy.
- That is why participating in these political forums will not mean cutting other political ties. On the contrary: precisely because these forums are focused on a new democratic beginning for society, they will not take the place of the political parties, trade unions, movements, civil-society organisations and local social initiatives. Instead, the forums will create spaces for common ground within them and between them: spaces firstly for democratic deliberation and subsequently for reaching agreement, in a spirit of solidarity, on a joint programme and project. At local level, the work of reaching agreement can begin everywhere: in the left's existing local networks, initiatives to welcome refugees, "City for All" projects or anti-Pegida alliances, local attac or DiEM25 groups, or groups of political friends who trust each other implicitly. What will be vital, however, is finding individuals everywhere who are willing to become the *initiators and moderators* of the process.

To reiterate: *our proposal to establish local political forums for a new democratic beginning is initially a proposal to begin engaging in debate*. We hope that these discussions will have become a broad public debate by the autumn of 2017. For that to happen, all those who want to establish and consolidate the common ground of the diverse debates taking place in society must now take action. This means, initially, finding time to engage in this process: we know that will not be easy. And so the *movement for debate* we are launching cannot be limited to the work of these local political forums. There will also have to be *regional forums* in the coming months and, as early as next year, *a major nationwide assembly*. We hope that this will be nothing less than the *nationwide founding assembly of the new democratic beginning itself* – the actual dawn of this new beginning.

This brings us to the next most important point, which is in some respects also the most sensitive. Naturally, the social and environmental transformation will not be a matter for the local political forums but rather, as is already the case today, a matter for the diverse crossover of all the debates taking place in society. Coming together to engage in discussion

is necessary, however, because this is not simply about creating a “broad alliance”, reaching a limited consensus and compromises, or issuing appeals and calls for action. Our point is that this is no longer the time for alliances, but the time to develop a joint project and to implement it over the next ten years.

As this is the case, we also want to turn now, finally, to our common ground: the social and environmental transformation of our society and its new democratic beginning. We have already referred to *DiEM25* and the *Call for a change of course in Europe*, and there are other initiatives we could have mentioned. What they all agree on is that, as things stand, we first of all need a large-scale emergency humanitarian programme in the EU, as the essential prerequisite for us to counter the ugliness of Fortress Europe with a Europe which can remain true to its greatest achievements – human rights and a democracy based on human rights. But an emergency programme of this kind will also need to put an end to the austerity regime and the surrendering of our common future to an economic order in which only profit counts. To be completely clear, this includes breaking off the TTIP and CETA negotiations and reaching a broad consensus in society on a democratic reversal of the globalisation process. For that to happen, a great many small steps with very far-reaching consequences will have to be taken at the same time. For example, the scope for action of Germany's *Länder* (federal states) and local authorities must be strengthened in financial and political terms; immediate steps must be taken to begin upgrading but also democratising the education and health systems; our social-security systems must be guaranteed, expanded and made more democratic; and the social, political and cultural rights of each and every individual must be defended and extended. As a first step in reclaiming our cities, immediate action is needed to create sufficient housing. For all of this, we need to radically reform tax policy, prevent criminal tax flight, ensure the fair taxation of investment income and high-wealth individuals, and thus reach a broad consensus in society on a sweeping democratisation of the economy. In other words, we need nothing less than a *social and environmental transformation of society on the way to a modern age of solidarity*.

- a change of political course and a radical change in society's relationship with nature, which can only be characterised by solidarity, i.e. social and economic justice, if it involves environmentally sustainable production methods and lifestyles (environmental dimension);
- fair redistribution and social rights guaranteed to all equally (social dimension);
- a renewal of democracy as a prerequisite for these two related revolutions and as an emancipatory objective in its own right (political dimension).

The solidarity-driven debate about these and other issues has already begun. Taking it seriously from now on, including as our election campaign, therefore means addressing the question of material and subjective resources. After all, it's not as though we have nothing else to do; on the contrary, we have long had far too much to do, and today we are already running low on the resources needed to do what we are already doing. Many of us are already at the limits of our energy, and frequently press on past these limits. For this reason, the political forums can, and indeed must, become spaces for setting priorities and deciding



what is to be done and what material and subjective resources are to be used where – by each individual for themselves, from the bottom up, and while nonetheless looking together at the process as a whole. At this point, we will begin by defining our own role:

- The ISM will be a focal point in the movement for a new democratic beginning and, to this end, will open up its own public outreach channels (publications, website, social networks). A special role will be played in this context by the media project *talk im transit*, which will be a priority in the ISM's work.
- Local *initiators and moderators* will play an important role in establishing the forums. The ISM asks all those who are willing to take responsibility for this in their community to contact us. This also applies to existing local and wider initiatives.
- The ISM is ready to do all it can to actively support the culture of debate and discourse that we are seeking to create. As the work of the political forums (and like-minded initiatives) will in large part consist of suitable events at local level, we are willing to present our proposal for discussion there too.
- To ensure that the local political forums do in fact become a crossover and mosaic of the diverse debates taking place in society about a left-wing world, the ISM is willing to participate in forging the links which this requires. This also applies to the regional forums and to the idea of bringing the hundreds of local movements together in 2017 in a nationwide founding assembly for the new democratic beginning.