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DIALOGUE ON EUROPE – Rebuilding trust and redefining Europe in tough times

Due to the emergence of populist movements in many European countries, sudden refugee influx and North-South division arising from the economic and financial crisis, Europe has to cope with serious challenges, otherwise facing a threat of further disintegration. DIALOGUE ON EUROPE, a project implemented by Das Progressive Zentrum with the support of the Federal Foreign Office, aims at countering those developments by bringing together representatives of the European civil society to work on visionary policy recommendations and foster trans-European cooperation.

The European Union has found itself in an unexpected identity crisis. Recent disintegrative developments have taken their toll on the concept of European integration and revealed a deep misunderstanding of what core European values are. Firstly, the economic crisis weakened the belief in the Community as a strong, united market player. The consequences of financial turmoil turned out to be a tangible memento of persisting inequalities between and within European societies. The Greek crisis, with its political, economic and sociocultural consequences, was a sad example of a growing alienation and detachment of the Member States.

Not much later, the migration challenge proved it even worse. Unprecedented in its numbers, the influx of refugees from Africa and the Middle East challenged not only European solidarity towards the “gateway” countries, like Greece and Italy, but also revealed how fragile liberal democracies can be. Anti-immigrant discourse brought about the rise of populist right-wing parties, like UKIP or *Alternative für Deutschland*. Direct political effects reached beyond the Visegrad Group vetoing refugee relocation quotas proposed by the European Commission and breaking the idea of solidaristic Europe. To much extend, the political crisis of the EU added fuel to the fire whilst the Brexit-referendum. It seems that when neglected, the challenges ahead of Europe piled up and are now too profound to be addressed by high-ranking politicians attending closed-door summits only. There is lack of trust and belief in Europe rising within the societies, also among the youngest generations. Reviving civic engagement, meaningful interest in politics and the feeling of European ownership is urgently needed. Sustainable solutions can best be achieved with the support of a strong and well-connected European civil society.

Anticipating these hardships, in 2015 *Das Progressive Zentrum* launched “DIALOGUE ON EUROPE – Rebuilding trust and redefining Europe in tough times”¹ in cooperation with the German Federal Foreign Office. The project initiated a two-year-long transnational dialogue process with young, promising thinkers from European countries, such as France, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and Germany. In order to initiate it, 5 Town Hall Meetings, subsequently held in Athens, Lisbon, Rome, Marseilles and Madrid were organized to gather the “movers and shakers” of the national and local levels in one place. More than 500 young, dedicated people from civil society, the media, politics, academia and business joined the events that featured not only lively workshop debates, but also public discussions with Michael Roth, Minister of State for Europe at the German Federal Foreign Office, giving the opportunity to openly ask questions about the most pressing European challenges.

This process, which has already won media attention of POLITICO², Der Standard³ and other national channels, successfully brought together key actors dedicated to foster a climate of mutual understanding between the participating states and societies. On 28 June 2016 during a conference in Berlin, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier officially launched the second phase of the DIALOGUE ON EUROPE Project⁴. Nearly 100 contributors and partners formerly engaged in the Town Hall Meetings joined the event marking the intermediate milestone of the project. They are currently developing genuinely European policy recommendations in four Thinking Labs⁵ focused on Populism, Social Cohesion, Migration & Integration and Sustainable Growth. These working groups benefit from the exchange of ideas and experiences of people based all over Europe. Geographical distances are no barriers as most of the work is done virtually.

Selected focus areas are crucial for the future of Europe. The Thinking Lab on Populism is dealing with one of the fastest growing phenomena in modern European politics. Well known in other parts of the world, such as Latin America, the concept of populism is still ambiguous. Some experts and journalists characterize as populist such heterogeneous political movements as Spanish left-wing *Podemos* or far right protest movement *Alternative für Deutschland*. The Thinking Lab strives to bring clarity into the debate and identify not only the basis of this phenomenon but also counter-measures to tackle it. The Thinking Lab on Social Cohesion is engaged with one of the main factors of discontent within the European Union: the increase of economic inequalities and its consequences for social cohesion and

¹ <http://dialogue-on-europe.eu/>

² <http://www.politico.eu/article/friendless-germany-launches-southern-charm-offensive-angela-merkel-minister-of-state-michael-roth-portugal/>

³ <http://derstandard.at/2000036582743/Es-braucht-europaeischen-Dialog-ueber-Europa>

⁴ <http://dialogue-on-europe.eu/dr-frank-walter-steinmeier-what-kind-of-europe-do-we-want/>

⁵ <http://dialogue-on-europe.eu/category/thinking-labs/>

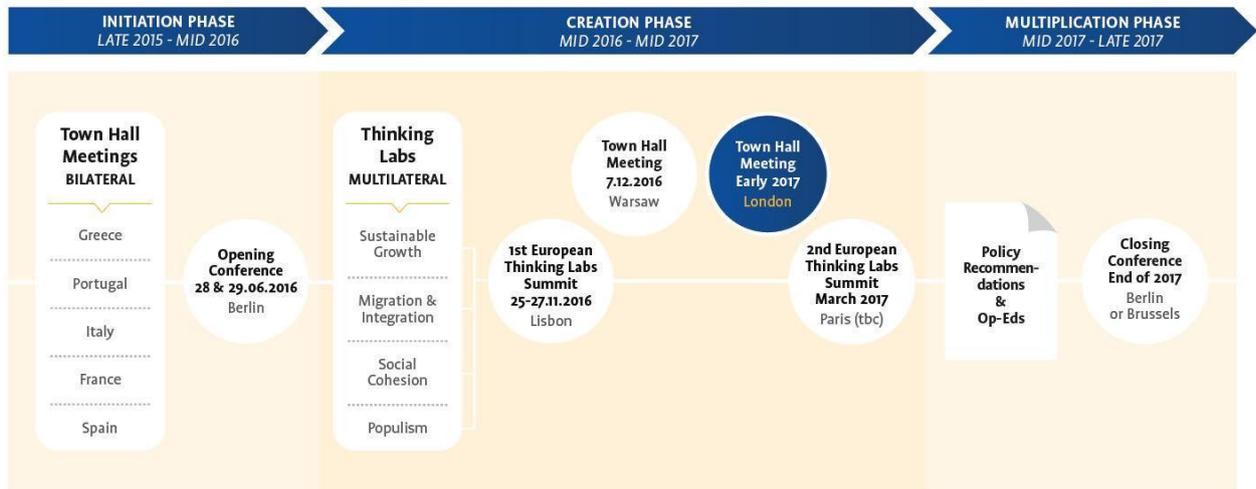
European integration. This Thinking Lab is ambitious to identify both current critical developments and appropriate solutions to the social consequences of the global economic crisis. The Lab looks into policy arrangements at national levels, however tracking global developmental tendencies at the same time. The Thinking Lab on Migration and Integration focuses on one of the most burning EU issues. Within one year, based on diverse experiences that Southern European countries and Germany have so far gathered, the Lab wants to deliver a genuine European perspective on migration and integration policy. The concept of “people on the move” rather than “refugees” or “migrants” remains the center of the debate. Last but not least, the Thinking Lab on Sustainable Growth aims at providing guidance to just transition models and inclusive economic growth in Europe. Sustainability is a broad concept, looking much further beyond environmental movements. To be successfully implemented, it has to be tackled with a cross-sectoral approach, incorporating topics such as energy policy, innovation, digitalization, social security and national debt policy. Through cooperation of those international teams, DIALOGUE ON EUROPE strives not only to deliver concrete policy recommendations answering the most pressing challenges for Europe, but also to contribute to more understanding and civil engagement across the European Union.

Responding to the latest political developments, the project recently included Great Britain and Poland as focal countries. The Brexit-referendum as well as tensions between Poland’s new government and the European Commission cannot be ignored when discussing the future of the European Union. Thus, two additional Town Hall Meetings - in Warsaw and in London - will give insight to the national debates and might be a chance for understanding the roots of the latest dissatisfaction with the European Union and its values.

All topics mentioned above are on the agenda both in Brussels and in the Member States, however official political summits hardly ever have an immediate impact. Thus, DIALOGUE ON EUROPE aims to involve real actors of change in Europe: civil society and its extensive networks. More than ever Europe needs strong social engagement to enhance civil participation in reforming the European project. By delivering innovative policy recommendations and establishing a sustainable network of young thinkers and practitioners DIALOGUE ON EUROPE will contribute to a bottom-up reintegration of Europe.

#DIALOGUE ONEUROPE

The Process



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