

## Europe on the Ballot: Why Transnational Parties Failed

Article by Filipe Henriques

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**Transnational parties promised to shake up EU politics before the European elections in 2019. Ahead of 2024, these experiments appear to have run out of road. The path towards European democracy cannot bypass national politics.**

Five years ago, Yanis Varoufakis announced what he described as “Europe’s first-ever transnational list” to contest the 2019 European elections. The left-wing movement that emerged, European Spring, was nothing of the sort – it was simply an alliance of existing parties and new DiEM25-branded national parties with a common platform. Since then, the allied parties have gone their separate ways, with forces including Alternativet in Denmark, Génération.s in France, Lewica Razem in Poland, and LIVRE in Portugal remaining relevant actors in their respective countries. At the same time, the DiEM25-branded supposedly transnational parties never got off the ground. Only Varoufakis’s personal party MeRA25 in Greece entered the national parliament in 2019. It recently lost all its representation in the Greek elections in May and June.

Before and after Varoufakis, many have claimed to be building “Europe’s first-ever transnational party”, but this ambition goes against the very essence of what Europe and the European Union are.

Across the continent, European democracy was built at the national level. Typically, there was a national democracy, which then regionalised, devolving powers and legitimate institutions to lower levels. This trajectory is mirrored in how political parties work, with strong national parties with regional chapters wielding different levels of internal strength. There are some exceptions, like Germany, where the first elections happened at the state level and only then a national demos was built. Accordingly, the regional chapters of the national parties are particularly powerful in Germany.

The European Union as a political entity was not built that way, but as a technocratic project that was slowly democratised. Today the EU is the most developed example of a continental democratic system where sovereignty resides principally within its constituents.

Political parties at the European level were first established in the mid-1970s. Unlike their national counterparts that developed from centralised organisations towards the regional level, European parties are composed of national formations that operate where most of the policy competencies remain. Until 1979, there were not even European elections to contest and, until 1992, European parties had no legal existence. They were only officially recognised in 2004.

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European parties thus have a double role: to build a nascent European democracy and to Europeanise

the political debate, in their member parties and society. They also coordinate national parties and their representation in the European institutions.

This task is not straightforward or easy. Power tends to stay where power is, and European political parties work with the fact that both their national constituent parties and their associated parliamentary groups have more media visibility and greater resources to develop their activities. Even though the role of European political parties running in European elections is clear, there is still a bureaucratic straitjacket impeding their work. Intense rules control every aspect of their daily political life, and they suffer from a lack of media coverage (such weak and uninformed coverage that is worse than none at all).

## **Failed experiments**

Many have tried to challenge this reality by creating centralised parties at the European level that exist in a unitary way across the continent. In the early 2000s, the pro-EU Newropeans and the conservative Libertas tried and failed. More recently DiEM25 and Volt did the same. While DiEM25 tried a composite version of centralised chapters together with existing national parties, Volt opted for a fully centralised structure which until recently denied any national deviations (until the Cypriot branch was forced to merge into an existing party).

Born out of the pro-EU post-Brexit movement, Volt made this European centralism and its proposals for European reform their single issue, leaving all other policy domains to a generic liberal progressive positioning. Yet, while successful in the Netherlands as a counterpoint to the prominence of Euroscepticism and thanks to an electoral system forgiving of new parties, it has failed to gather any relevant results in any other countries. Volt managed only to elect one MEP in Germany – where the 0.67 per cent result is enough to elect – and two MPs in Bulgaria in a six-party anti-corruption coalition in November 2021 (after the most recent election, that number has gone down to a single MP).

What DiEM25 and Volt failed to understand is that Europe and the European Union are complex realities, whose regional differences are key to its success. In trying to build a centralised top-down party, they went against the essence of European politics, which assembles these different realities.

This need for a strong decentralised party structure is not unique to European politics. Federal countries such as the US, Canada, India and Australia all have political parties composed of alliances of regional structures that share the same broad values but with their distinguishing characteristics. No one looks at how the US Democratic Party spans the progressivism of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and the conservatism of Joe Manchin and thinks that there is no US federal politics because of the gulf between them.

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In the same way, Europe needs to grow out of national-based discussions and considerations. This process may be slow, but it is steadily advancing. Political debates have grown more European, while political decisions have stayed national. In attempting a jump to the European level, experiments such as

DiEM25 and Volt made a correct diagnosis of what Europe is missing. But they failed to offer a real solution. Their centralised models turned out to be detached from Europe's varied social and political realities. Focusing on a single issue, they failed to bring anything new and their continuous electoral defeats show as much.

## A more democratic Union

To build a genuinely transnational democracy, we need to develop European structures that nevertheless respect Europe's plurality. The recent conservative push to torpedo the EU's proposed Nature Restoration Law has shown that European debates based on ideology, not nationality, already exist.

Now we must break down the obstacles that stop this dynamic from developing further. We need a stronger Europe-focused media; clarity in the lead candidate process for European elections; a politicised European Commission, transitioning from politicians-playing-bureaucrats to an actual European government not afraid of nor forbidden from doing politics; the introduction of transnational lists for the European Parliament to Europeanise political debate; the removal of the bureaucratic straitjacket that prevents existing European political parties from doing pan-European politics; and the primacy of parliamentary democracy against the nationalistic thinking of the European Council.

Many parts of the world have tried to develop continental democratic structures that bring together diverse national realities. While the European Union is flawed, it is the best and strongest example of continental democracy. As the world faces more and more global challenges, the future of Europe will be that of democratising and strengthening its transnational characteristics. The 2024 European elections will be another step in that direction.



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