

The Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25) and the limitations of transnational populism

Can you create an electorally successful left populist movement beyond the nation state? Benjamin Moffitt, Benjamin De Cleen, Panos Panayotu and Yannis Stavrakakis examine the transnational populist European movement DiEM25, which stood in several countries in the recent European Parliament elections, and considers its prospects in establishing an electorally competitive movement at the transnational level.



Yanis Varoufakis. Picture: [El Despertador \(youtube\)](#)/ CC BY 3.0 licence

We all know that populism is the flavour *du jour* in political science today. We also know that populism is often [conflated with nationalism](#) in popular and academic discussions, especially in the fallout of the election of Trump and the results of the Brexit referendum. But what happens when populism explicitly tries to decouple itself from nationalism – and indeed, move into a transnational space?

There is a very interesting case of such ‘transnational populism’ unfolding at the present moment: that of the Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25). Launched in 2016 by former Greek Finance Minister Yanis Varoufakis, DiEM25 has sought to construct a pro-European transnational left political project in the aftermath of the European debt crisis. It seeks to ‘democratise Europe’ via a transnational strategy that aims to construct a European ‘people’ against ‘the elite’ – in short, attempting a novel form of transnational populism. This raises questions about the potentials of populism beyond the usual setting of the nation-state. Indeed, the formation of the transnational DiEM25 was a response to the failure of the left-wing populist SYRIZA to turn its electoral success on a national level into real leverage against international creditors and institutions.

How successful is DiEM25 in constructing such a movement? Is DiEM25 a truly transnational populist movement or does it remain tethered to the national level? To find this out, in our article published in *Political Studies*, we first used discourse theory to build a conceptualisation of populism and nationalism that offers a set of formal criteria to distinguish these discourses from one another. We were particularly interested in the central signifier, or nodal point, of the discourse (is it ‘the nation’ or ‘the people’ as underdog?); the subject positions it offers (members of ‘the nation’ as a community linked to a particular territory or members of ‘the people’ as an underdog?); how outsiders are constructed (non-members of the nation or ‘the elite’?), and the orientation between the nodal point and those set outside these positions (is it a horizontal in/out relationship on the basis of national identity, or is it a vertical up/down relationship on the basis of hierarchy and power?).

We then undertook a qualitative content analysis of the movement's manifestos, speeches, press releases and published interviews with DiEM25 leaders (especially Varoufakis) to examine how it constructs a supranational 'elite' as its enemy and how it aims to construct a 'European people' in opposition to that 'elite'. Our analysis showed that DiEM25 can indeed be seen as a form of transnational populism, but also that its move towards the transnational is not total, and that the national level remains crucial to its demands for democracy. This tension was clear in the way that DiEM25 oscillates between speaking in the name of 'the people' (which tend to be transnational) and in the plural names of 'the peoples' of Europe (the separate 'people' of different European nations). It is also apparent in how it set up national party wings initially in Greece and Germany and later also in a number of other countries to compete in the May 2019 EU Parliament elections. These national wings are presented as part and parcel of the transnational movement, and candidate lists were built transnationally (with Varoufakis, for example, running in Germany).

In short, we found that DiEM25 wants to straddle both the transnational and national dimensions: as Varoufakis has noted, 'we have already experienced how the blending together of Europeans across nations and political parties into one transnational organisation is producing "proof" that, on top of our existing multiple identities, it is not only possible but also empowering to overlay a new one – a transnational identity of our own making: radical, anti-authoritarian, democratic Europeanism'. The national and transnational do not constitute a contradiction according to DiEM25 – they exist as moments of the same political hegemonic project.

Our analysis of DiEM25 also showed that populism does not have to be tied to nationalism or nativism, as is so often the case in academic and popular work on the topic. Indeed, DiEM25 represent a case of left populism that is cosmopolitan and pro-refugee, running 'let them in' and 'stop the deal' campaigns (the latter supporting legal action against the 2016 EU-Turkey deal on asylum seekers), which explicitly support and welcome refugees and asylum seekers. Here DiEM25 sets itself against 'the nationalist alternative [which] is to divide, to foster distrust leading to violence and perhaps to war'. Varoufakis has argued that 'a progressive international' is the only way 'to counter the nationalist international that is gaining strength all over the world'. DiEM25 does not advocate leaving the European Union, or a 'Lexit', but rather demands that the EU be democratised.

Why should we care about what looks like it could be a relatively marginal political movement? The 2019 European elections clearly showed the limitations of DiEM25's strategies, with none of its national wings managing to elect a candidate to the European Parliament. In Denmark, Alternativet (which adopted DiEM25's manifesto) scored 3.4%, in France Benoit Hamon's DiEM25-associated Générations scored 3.27%, MeRA25 scored 2.98% in Greece, LIVRE scored 1.8% in Portugal, RAZEM scored 1.2% in Poland, and Demokratie in Europa scored 0.3% in Germany.

Our argument is that DiEM25 may reflect a structural limit that all inclusionary populist forces in Europe are bound to face in any attempt to energise populist electoral mobilisation and policy application beyond the nation-state. Establishment forces already seem to be able to function at the transnational level, even through ad hoc institutions such as the Eurogroup, in which the acceptable degrees of legitimacy and accountability are quite low and flexible. This reflects a pre-existing agreement on commonly accepted policies. Such a transnational coordination cannot simply be replicated by anti-establishment forces to the extent that resistance is still mostly framed at the level of national community – especially when it takes the electoral route (a different picture emerges when looking at the transnational social movement strategies of, for example, the alter-globalisation movement). The enjoyment of rights and the defence of them remains largely tied to membership of a nation-state, and the discursive and affective investment of oppositional demands and identities seem to remain largely attached to the nation-state. The DiEM25 case shows that, yes, transnational populism is possible not only in theory but also in practice, but such an endeavour cannot simply escape the national level, and that speaking in the name of a transnational people is one thing, but actually constructing such a people is another.

Varoufakis is running with MERA25 in the upcoming national elections in Greece on 7 July, with current polls indicating they will likely win some seats in the Greek Parliament. But, even if the party does manage to do well, and even though MERA25 presents itself as firmly part of the transnational DiEM25 effort, the question remains whether MERA25's success would really be a win for a truly transnational populism.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of Democratic Audit. It is based on research published in [Political Studies](#). An earlier version of this text appeared on the [Political Studies Association's blog](#), and was adapted to reflect the results of the 2019 European elections.

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