

Yanis Varoufakis' new DiEM25 movement should be welcomed by progressive pro-Europeans

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2016/02/15/varoufakis-new-democracy-in-europe-movement-is-good-news-for-pro-european-progressiv

2/15/2016

Former Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis has launched a new pan-European initiative, the 'Democracy in Europe Movement 2025' (DiEM25), which brings together parties and grassroots organisations across the continent with the aim of 'democratising Europe'. [Sophie Heine](#) argues that the new initiative should be viewed as a positive development by progressive pro-Europeans who would like to see a more democratic EU. However she states that the broad church assembled by Varoufakis may struggle to present a realistic vision for a new Europe due to the lack of ideological consensus among its members.



Yanis Varoufakis, the former Greek finance minister, has drawn some conclusions from the Syriza government's failure to implement a left-wing policy at the national level and through traditional party politics. After leaving the Greek government last summer, he started a dialogue with other left-wing movements in Europe to discuss new possibilities for the left and the EU. This has led to the initiative '[Democracy in Europe Movement 2025](#)' (DiEM25), which was officially launched in Berlin on 9 February. This new movement starts from the [principle](#) that democracy no longer exists in Europe and that this is one of the main reasons for the rise of nationalism across the continent.

What does the new movement stand for?

Varoufakis considers, in line with a classical Marxist perspective, that the choices made by representative democracy are accepted by the economically powerful only when they do not contradict their interests. In his view, the compromises asked for by the Tsipras government – backed with popular legitimacy – precisely opposed the interests defended by the Troika. As such he sees the functioning of the Monetary Union and its focus on austerity as undemocratic. More generally, he attacks the bureaucratic depoliticising of economic issues within the EU.

In this context, Varoufakis argues that it is largely useless to focus on national politics to try and bring about change and that a new movement should be built directly on a European basis. The movement puts forward an ultimatum: that there should be a democratisation of the EU or its abolition. The minimum demand is that the European Council, Ecofin and Eurogroup meetings should be live streamed, the European Central Bank's minutes published, and documents related to trade negotiations like the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) made available online.

In the short to medium-term, DiEM25 [advocates](#) the redeployment of existing EU institutions within current treaties in order to stabilise the crises concerning public debt, underinvestment, banking and rising poverty. Finally, in the medium to long-term, it [supports](#) the creation of a Constitutional Assembly convened by the peoples of Europe and empowered to decide on a future democratic constitution replacing current treaties.

The need for a genuinely European movement on the left

In assessing the creation of the new movement, the first point to note is that it is undoubtedly good news for those disappointed in the current state of the EU, and particularly for progressives, that a personality such as Varoufakis has decided to found a new European movement. Indeed, within the left, the critical debate on how to redirect the EU seems to have gradually subsided over the last decade and to have been replaced by a renewed focus on national politics.

This evolution reflected a clear disappointment in what seemed to be an unchangeable set of institutions and

policies at the EU level. In this respect, the lack of change that followed the rejection of the European constitutional treaty in two founding Member States was seen as a blow by many left-wing Eurosceptics. Until then, this kind of criticism was indeed directed against the existing EU but was very much European or, more precisely, 'alter-European' in its inspiration.

A significant sector of the left had proposed the creation of a different kind of European project: one that is democratic and just in contrast to the existing EU, which they perceive to be undemocratic and neoliberal. This project would not only be distinctly European in its content, but also highly Europeanised, involving, among other things, the regular gathering of European social forums, which, along the lines of the World social forums, constitute attempts to connect alternative ideas and strategies beyond national borders.

After this period, there was a substantial renationalisation of the radical left, not so much in its ideas as in its strategy. The brief enthusiasm which surrounded the movement of the 'indignados' in Spain was an exception to this general tendency, but only to a certain extent. Indeed, neither the message nor the approach of the 'indignados', in Spain or elsewhere, was inherently European or transnational.

The indignados were, if anything, much less representative of citizens demanding 'another Europe' than the alter-globalists used to be: they expressed a critical message with a far more general focus, protesting against austerity measures and the allegedly anti-democratic tendencies of European governments. With regard to established political organisations, the radical left's representation has been mainly at the national level through Syriza, Podemos and other parties seeking to enter government.

While the attempts by such parties to secure national power does not preclude the promotion of a different vision for Europe, they nevertheless remain national movements, with the struggle for radical left politics focused principally on securing majorities within individual states. Yet, because of the complexity of the EU's decision-making process, this strategy is likely to fail. It rests on the unrealistic assumption that enough governments can turn to the left and demand change that would be favourable to their electorate. And when this does not happen, the Greek government's dramatic failure – predictable by most lucid observers – is doomed to be reproduced in other countries.

Moreover, none of these organisations are entirely free from patriotic tendencies which could, in particular contexts, easily become nationalistic. And as history shows, nationalism, even in its most progressive forms, can easily lead to the exclusion of minorities, repression of particular 'others', justification of the elites' powers independently of and often in contradiction with the interests of the majority, and overall pressures on individual freedoms. This is a tendency [intrinsic](#) to all forms of communitarian approaches to politics.

A movement open to all that moves beyond the left-right divide

A second important point in relation to Varoufakis' new movement is that the initiative could also break with traditional politics in another sense: by becoming a grassroots network rather than a traditional political party. DiEM25's appeal has been directed openly to all actors and organisations, not only existing parties, and the decision to frame it as a [movement](#) rather than a 'party' is deliberate. Movements are assumed to be more horizontal and egalitarian in their organisation rather than 'top down' and hierarchical. This also reflects the general lack of focus on winning national power: the objective is instead to build pressure on existing leaders, mainly through the elaboration of new ideas.

The goal is thus to build an alternative European message that emerges from an explicitly European civil society, rather than on creating yet another party or cooperation between parties. In this respect, it is clearly distinct from the 'Plan B' conversation launched last November in Paris by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the European deputy for the French *Parti de Gauche*. Varoufakis' absence from this meeting was extremely telling.

A final interesting feature of the movement concerns its willingness to move beyond the left-right divide. The notion

is that anyone can join regardless of political or ideological affiliations and that participants will be unified around the theme of democracy. While this could ultimately prove to be a weakness in the long term, it is hoped that the movement's degree of openness can act as an efficient marketing strategy as it seeks to find its feet.

Limitations and challenges

DiEM25 is nevertheless not without its limitations. The movement puts democracy at the forefront of its objectives. Democracy is perceived as the defining element of a European sovereignty that is yet to be built and is supposed to be translated into the possibility for a democratic parliament to censure or dismiss institutions and bodies that currently make key political decisions, such as the European Council, Ecofin or the Eurogroup.

Varoufakis argues that such a European sovereignty could rest on a common identity, even if there is no European nation. This vision therefore does not depart from the traditionally communitarian approach, according to which a political community requires a common culture or identity. Yet, if it is indeed essential to reclaim the concept of sovereignty at the European level, one could [argue](#) that it would be more realistic to justify a European sovereignty on instrumental grounds – namely, the conformity between its policies and the interests of the population.

More generally, this vision of democracy and of sovereignty is still quite underdeveloped and not at all linked to the concept of European federalism. It could nonetheless be fruitful for DiEM25 to establish a dialogue with federalist movements, since the latter seem to increasingly express the objective of building a genuine form of European sovereignty.

Furthermore, the refusal to give a clear ideological content to the movement's project of democratising the EU could end up being a notable problem rather than part of the solution. Is it really realistic to expect a strong mobilisation to emerge from a mere democratic ideal? Can democracy really be the main objective of a political movement? Should this ideal not simply act as the means to achieve other goals, such as those related to social justice, equality and freedom?

If it is true that other principles should be put forward to explain why we need a more democratic Europe then it is hardly possible to gather all ideological tendencies in the same organisation or network. To mobilise support for a more just Europe, one needs to propose, on the one hand, convincing political projects and, on the other, advance their connection to the ideal of creating an alternative Europe. In other words, one needs, first and foremost, a realistic endpoint for which efficient European action is merely a means to reaching. It is far from certain that this will emerge from the broad church convened by Varoufakis.

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image credits: [Valerij Ledenev](#) (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1PxkucW>

About the author

Sophie Heine – Egmont Institute and Oxford University

Sophie Heine is Senior Research Fellow at Egmont Institute and Research Associate to Oxford University

