



# Building a pan-European movement party: DiEM25 at the 2019 European elections

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## abstract

In this research note, I analyse the case of DiEM25, a pan-European movement that decided to contest for the 2019 European elections and ran in seven different countries with the same programme. Focussing on Germany, I discuss how the different logics of spontaneity in social movements and party politics both enabled and constrained the electoral campaign. Building on official documentation as well as my own experience as part of the campaign, I suggest that organizational complexity, lack of resources and reluctance to embrace electoral politics on the part of movement-oriented members finally contributed to the failure to secure seats in European parliament. The paper also contextualizes both the political junctures of DiEM25's emergence and the political opportunity structures in Germany at the time of the campaign arguing that the political space was quite narrow in light of political contenders and public opinion in Germany in relation to the European Union.

## Introduction

The Democracy in Europe Movement 2025 (DiEM25) was founded by Yanis Varoufakis and other 'luminaries of the European Left' (de Cleen et al., 2019) such as Slavoj Žižek and British Green MP Caroline Lucas in February 2016 in Berlin at Volksbühne theatre ('theatre of the people'). One of the main claims was that unless the European Union chooses the path of more democracy and allows for more people power, it will disintegrate. Prominent EU-scholars

such as Claus Offe (2015) argue that the European Union institutions suffer from democratic deficits and are unfit in solving the current interlinking crises of ecological disaster, financial turmoil, and more. Similarly, but somewhat radicalized, DiEM25' manifesto analyses the current political juncture in the following terms:

Now, today, Europeans are feeling let down by EU institutions everywhere. From Helsinki to Lisbon, from Dublin to Crete, from Leipzig to Aberdeen, Europeans sense that a stark choice is approaching fast. The choice between authentic democracy and insidious disintegration. We must resolve to unite to ensure that Europe makes the obvious choice: authentic democracy. (Adler and Bechler, 2020: 21)

As I will argue in this article, the foundation of DiEM25 cannot be understood without the economic recession following Euro-crisis with a standoff between the newly elected Greek Syriza government with Varoufakis as brief albeit memorable Finance Minister in 2015 on the one side, and the troika (European Commission, European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund) on the other. One of the crucial architects of European austerity measures was the German government with former Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble as a key player. DiEM25 accused the German administration of tearing apart the EU by pitting individual member states against each other. This along the perceived lack of credible political alternatives gave the movement the impetus to contest the European elections 2019 as a pan-European party.

Recent scholarship in political science but also increasingly in organization studies finds interest in the emergence of movement parties created as a consequence of the great recession and also organizational inertia of traditional political parties (e.g. Fougère & Barthold, 2020; Husted, 2020; Jun, 2019; Hutter & Kriesi, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2019a; Gerbaudo 2019b; Cervera-Marzal, 2018; della Porta et al., 2017; Fredriksson Almqvist, 2016). These studies also stress how movement parties innovate participatory democracy making extensive use of digital platforms.

Studying the case of DiEM25 can add to the ongoing debates on movement parties for at least two reasons. First, other the above mentioned movement parties, DiEM25 most and foremost self-identifies as a movement with 'electoral wings' with decisions conforming with whole movement's consent

(DiEM25, 2017). Other cases such as the 5 Star Movement, Pirate Parties, la République en Marche or Podemos have integrated more fully in existing party systems (which is also due to their respective electoral successes). Second, while most scholars focus on national movement parties, few have yet tried to grapple with movement parties running on European issues or in European elections or both (a useful exception is de Cleen et al., 2019). This is not very surprising as they are not many cases that can be consulted. In this sense, I am going to present DiEM25 as a movement party that in some respects sits uneasily in line with the above mentioned movement parties while sharing some organizational features.

While there is increasing interest in the study of populist discourse of movement parties (Fougère & Barthold, 2020; de Cleen et al., 2019), in the context of this paper I am more interested in the intra-organizational level of DiEM25's 2019 campaign; especially how during the campaign the movement and the party worked together and analyse the constraints of this case of a party *within* a movement. I will also point to some structural factors based on which I think the electoral campaign remained largely unsuccessful.

I fully and proudly disclose that I have been a candidate for DiEM25's electoral wing 'Demokratie in Europa-DiEM25' in Germany at the European elections. After contextualizing what led to the participation of DiEM25 at the European elections, I briefly discuss some considerations on the document types I use to study the campaign. In my analysis of the electoral campaign, I will limit myself to the German campaign of Demokratie in Europa-DiEM25 knowing full well how rich the experience in other countries was where DiEM25 contested under the same electoral programme.

## **DiEM25: The road to the European elections 2019**

In this section, I want to provide the political context and portray some key events, main actors and processes that help to understand the path that led to DiEM25's participation in the 2019 campaign for the European elections.

The creation of the movement cannot be understood without the Eurozone crisis and the stand-off between the troika and far-left Syriza government that

took office in February 2015 in Greece. Syriza's election was enabled by what was called the 'Athens Spring', the mobilisation to resist the bailout terms formulated by the troika to cut public spending, privatize national assets and accept loans that eventually led to an economic depression Greece has yet to recover from (Stiglitz, 2017). After Syriza's election Yanis Varoufakis came to world prominence as Greek Finance Minister calling out Greece's bailout terms as unsustainable. However, the Greek government eventually succumbed to the pressure of the troika after Varoufakis resigned from his office in frustration that Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras was ready to sign the bailout terms (Varoufakis, 2017).

The confrontation was also a highly mediated battle of ideas in which German Minister of Finance Wolfgang Schäuble drove the agenda of the troika and communicated widely on the topic to the German electorate. Schäuble's agenda to remain firm on the demand to accept the strict bailout terms even if it meant that Greece had to leave the Eurozone ('Grexit') was controversial. For example, US-Economist Joseph Stiglitz questioned the underlying economic assumptions of the German government in the Eurozone crisis:

Germany's stance is predicated on the belief that profligate government spending leads to crisis – and that it led to the current eurozone crisis. That is simply wrong. (Stiglitz, 2017: 245)

In Germany, progressive commentators criticized the German government calling German's stance toward Greece 'Merkel's poison for Europe' (Augstein, 2015) and German economic policy 'a threat for Europe' (Flassbeck, 2015). The indignation among progressives in Germany and elsewhere who decried that the EU could fall apart in the face of missing solidarity and the vilification of the 'PIIGS' (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Spain) called for intellectual leadership on the Left. Grievances around the perceived betrayal of the 'Athens Spring' and mismanagement of the Great Recession created a political widow of opportunity for a transnational movement to emerge. It is in this political climate of indignation and uncertainty that DiEM25 emerged making an open invitation to everyone interested to join a progressive agenda for Europe to join in. In early 2016, electoral politics was not part of the initial call to action. However, with the presence of a number of politicians from around Europe, contact to existing parties in Europe was close from the start.

Katja Kipping, chairwoman of the far-left party Die Linke and member of parliament joined the launch of DiEM25 stressing the importance of a transnational grassroots approach to solving the Euro-crisis as well as calling on a European approach to migration policy.

In the DiEM25 manifesto that was presented at the launch, the European Union was called an ‘exceptional achievement’ hijacked by a technocratic elite driven by monied interests (Adler & Bechler, 2020: 18). Unless Europe’s structures would become more transparent and democratic until 2025, DiEM25 predicted that the Union will disintegrate until then. The Brexit referendum in the same year seemed to confirm some of the concerns presented in the manifesto. From the beginning, DiEM25 found support among progressive public intellectuals and activists such as Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein or Julian Assange. Active supporters of DiEM25 are also actors and musicians such as Pamela Anderson and Brian Eno.

Since its launch in 2016, the movement has managed to sign up more than 135.000 members online. A number of local groups were subsequently founded in Germany and elsewhere in Europe. Currently there are 22 local groups active in Germany (DiEM25, n.d.a). These groups – called DiEM25’s Spontaneous Collectives (DSCs) – are self-managed horizontal structures to spread the ideas of DiEM25, develop policy proposals, engage in demonstrations in line with the organisation, among other activities (DiEM25, n.d.b). Democracy within DiEM25 is managed through the active engagement of registered members on crucial policy positions, so-called all-member-votes (AMVs). Members from around the world are asked to vote on policy proposals or selection of candidates for coordinating bodies within DiEM25.

After the launch in February 2016, a number of well-attended events were organized in different European cities presenting different policy pillars. In Spring 2017, internal discussions on whether DiEM25 should run in the European elections 2019 started. DiEM25s Coordinating Collective (CC) put forward a proposal based on consultation with members. The political analysis was such that DiEM25s participation in the EP elections was a necessary and urgent step in light of ‘visionless’ traditional parties (DiEM25,

2017). The proposal entitled ‘not just another political party’ referred to the creation of a transnational party as ‘one of its tools for democratising Europe’ (ibid.).

From the day DiEM25 was inaugurated in Berlin, in February 2016, we have been saying that we have no urge to contest elections, in the daily hustle of what passes for “politics”. We would rather continue in our chosen areas of activism, while supporting existing progressive political parties. (...) Alas, Europe’s crisis and slow descent into a quagmire of incompetent authoritarianism does not give us the right to do so. The window for us to effect change is closing and this has become even more pressing after the recent German election, which killed off the last remaining hope for a federalist democratic push by Macron and Merkel. Time is running short. (DiEM25, 2017)

After explaining why DiEM25 should run in elections, the text goes on to explain how DiEM25 would not cease to be a movement but instead reaffirmed to be guided by its members. ‘DiEM25 will thus remain a movement, whose members guide the policies as they do now, while developing an electoral wing which catalyses political developments’ (DiEM25, 2017). Further internal discussions on electoral politics led to an AMV on the question of whether DiEM25 wanted to participate in the European elections in May 2019. The result of internal decision-making was that political parties, or ‘electoral wings’ as DiEM25 calls them, were to be created in countries where existing parties would not adopt DiEM25’s political programme.

From the start the vision was to run with a common policy programme in as many European countries as possible in spite of the European parliament rejecting the idea of transnational lists in February 2018 (i.e. the idea that candidates can be elected from all over Europe in a single constituency rallying for the same programme rather than running largely national campaigns for national parties with national programmes within the confines of the individual nation states). In March 2018, DiEM25 proudly presented the ‘first transnational European list’ in Naples with official delegates from France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Denmark and Germany present and observers including the Party of European Greens and Party of the European Left (Pietrandrea, 2018). Benoît Hamon, the former Socialist candidate for French president joined the alliance to rally European movements and parties under a common policy programme and a *Spitzenkandidat* as a symbolic head of the

list for the position of European commission president (ibid.). In the communiqué of the Naples meeting, the project was portrayed in the following terms:

We come from Europe's North, South, East and West. We come from Central Europe as well as from its islands and outermost regions. We are progressives, radical democrats, ecologists, feminists. We are citizens, activists, mayors, local councilors [sic.]. And we bring to Europe's first transnational party list our different cultures, languages, accents, political party backgrounds, ideologies, skin colours, gender identities.

We are committed to getting back our cities, our regions, our countries, our environment, our Europe. We aim at becoming the credible, coherent, radical alternative in Europe's Parliament. (DiEM25, 2018a)

Three month after the Naples meeting, a gathering in Frankfurt on 2 June 2018 officially founded the German electoral wing called Demokratie in Europa-DiEM25 (DiEM25, 2018b). That day around 70 members signed up as members of the party. Statutes in line with DiEMs manifesto were also adopted that day. From the start the relationship between the movement and the party caused discussions among members. Most DiEM25 members had voted for a structure of co-existence between the movement and political party instead of a full-transition to a political party. After the event, selected members of the board of the German electoral wing officially partook in the gatherings to advance the New Deal for Europe in various meetings that had started in Naples. The next section briefly discusses some methodological considerations and in order to understand and explain DiEM25's mobilization potential as well as trying to explain the rather disappointing electoral results with a focus on Germany.

## Methods

Broadly speaking, political party research mainly focuses on three different areas: parties in government, parties as organizations and parties in elections (Noel, 2010). In principle, all three categories can also be studied for the cases of movement parties (although not a great number of movement parties have entered government yet). My analysis of DiEM25 focuses on the interface between parties as organizations and parties in elections. More specifically,

my main interest is flesh out how DiEM25 negotiated its aspirations to be a pan-European movement with electoral aspirations.

In my analysis, I draw on key documents published by DiEM25 and my own participation in the electoral campaign for the European elections in Germany. Key documents include the DiEM25 manifesto, the common electoral programme that was adopted by partnering parties in seven different countries, press articles and documents from the DiEM25 website.

### **DiEM25's European election campaign**

The vast ambition of DiEM25's campaign was to unite 'behind a shared vision of Europe as a realm of democracy, sustainability, prosperity and peace' (European Spring, 2019: 6). I present DiEM25's 2019 campaign by describing how these goals were put in practice in three different phases by the German electoral wing. First, building internal capacity and negotiating with allied political parties. Second, selection of political personnel. Third, organization of the political campaign. I argue that at every of the three stages the campaign was constrained by its organizational structure of being a social movement with an electoral wing.

The first phase started after the German electoral wing was founded in June 2019. Party structures had to be established from scratch.<sup>1</sup> German electoral law provides a prescribed timeline and procedures to formalize political parties that want to run for elections. On the one hand, this helped to structure the internal timeline and identify tasks. On the other hand, the formalization of the party proved to be quite demanding, technical and hence time consuming, not least because most activists never ran election campaigns before. In the following, 13 main tasks were identified including election strategy, press liaison, social media and fundraising in order to run a successful campaign (Demokratie in Europa – DiEM25, 2020).

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<sup>1</sup> DiEM25's electoral wing in Germany decided to register as a Sonstige Politische Vereinigung (SPV) (literally 'other political association') which is not strictly the same as a political party, but has similar legal status which allows SPVs to contest European elections.



In the first months, a lot of resources were also allocated to negotiating possible alliances with other parties. Smaller existing progressive parties showed very interested in forming partnering with DiEM25 for elections. Discussions about possible collaboration with a newly established party called Democracy in Motion (DiB) were undertaken from very early on. Even though the negotiations took place in a cordial spirit and it was easy to agree on principles it showed more demanding to agree on procedures and the parameters of a final agreement. Finally, there was an agreement that both members of DiEM25 in an all-member-vote as well as from the majority of members of DiB approved. Later on, Mut ('courage') another political party based in Bavaria actively supported DiEM25's electoral wing's effort to enter the European parliament. Both DiB and Mut were particularly drawn to the DiEM25's initiative to build an umbrella organization to contest in European elections. This however also created a level of complexity that was difficult to manage as different parties and movements wanted their logos, ideas and personnel to prominently feature in the campaign.

By the time the alliances were agreed on there was a realization that outreach of the party had been quite limited. Some press articles had been written before the formalization of the party, but the media's interest had been insignificant for a few months. This changed when the personnel was chosen and DiEM25 announced that Yanis Varoufakis would run in Germany and not as was expected in Greece. Sueddeutsche Zeitung announced the 'return of the rebel' (Al-Serori, 2018). But the news of Varoufakis running in Germany was also picked up by international media including the Time Magazine and the Economist, among others (Perrigo, 2018; The Economist staff reporters, 2019). At this point Varoufakis affirmed that it was with reluctance that he ran of office calling it a 'necessity' and saying he disliked 'running and asking people for votes' (Economist staff reporters, 2019). This echoed DiEM25's 'not just another party' stance. The electoral project also found support at campaign events where list candidates spoke alongside other DiEM25 activists or supporters, which stressed that DiEM25 remained an organization primarily driven by political activism.

However, on a grassroots level not every local group was happy to campaign for elections. This showed when 4.000 signatures had to be collected and

presented to the German election panel after the candidates were chosen in November 2018. The collection of signatures took much longer than initially expected with relatively few local groups actively being involved in the collection in the streets. However after a rather sluggish start, finally more than enough valid signatures were collected due to increased communication with DiEM25 members to sign the supporting document and possibly also collect signatures themselves.

During the campaign stage, DiEM25 used traditional as well as non-traditional campaigning tools. 72.000 flyers, 25.000 business cards and 3.030 election posters were printed and distributed during the campaign (Demokratie in Europa, 2019). Compared to 25.000 posters that the Christian democratic party (CDU) hung in the city of Berlin alone, it shows how unequal resources were distributed (Berlin.de, 2019). Similarly, the Christian democrats spent 227.600 Euros for Facebook adds while DiEM25 spend 11.200 Euros (Pauly and Stotz, 2019). DiEM25 tried different ways of engaging voters online and offline. For example, a petition for a Green New Deal (Demokratie in Europa – DiEM25, 2019) and participation in a number of demonstrations. Campaign action was mainly undertaken in the cities where DiEM25 was able to organize election campaign groups (Berlin, Hamburg, Freiburg, Goettingen, Hamburg, Munich and Cologne). These are the cities in which DiEM25s electoral wing also scored its best results.

Another campaign effort was to register non-German EU-citizens to vote. European citizens with residency in Germany are allowed to vote, but other than Germans have to put their name on a voting register. The campaign was very much in line with the pan-European message DiEM25 wanted to send out. However, it was not recognizably from the party and obviously the action did not necessarily translate to voters deciding to vote DiEM25 in the end. While well intentioned, it showed that DiEM25's campaign was not as streamlined as existing parties' actions.

In a number of campaign actions different logos and messages sometimes caused confusion from on the part of the voters. When I talked about DiEM25's transnational structure and international supporters to a potential voter he commented that it the campaign sounded more like an 'art project'.

A volunteer from Göttingen lamented that: ‘it was often difficult to explain Demokratie in Europa, because we did not have one name and one branding’ (volunteer account, 2019).

From the above discussion, three limiting factors can be identified: organizational complexity, lack of resources and reluctance to embrace electoral politics on the part of the members. Adding to these factors, I want to finally add some structural factors that indicate that the window of opportunity was not as big as the campaign hoped. The two limiting factors were the existing political offers especially from the Green Party and Left Party and secondly the overall approval of the EU institutions and Germany’s role in Europe (Eurobarometer, 2019).

The European parliamentary elections 2019 were contested by 41 parties (Bundeswahlleiter, 2019). With the enormous run of political parties to secure seats it was difficult for individual parties with a low budget to stand out. In the aftermath of the elections a number of activists suggested that DiEM25’s call for a Green New Deal was often mistaken to be a Green Party campaign. The Green party scored a historical success winning 21 seats in the EP (ibid.). If voters who liked the idea of a Green New Deal voted for the Greens at the election in the assumption that they had seen Green party messages cannot definitively be answered. It rather showed that DiEM25 was scoring above average results in places where the Greens also performed much better than their national average like in Freiburg, Berlin or Hamburg. Voters in these cities still overwhelmingly voted for the Green Party and allowed DiEM25 only small vote share. Die Linke that is putting a particular emphasis on inequality with strong anti-capitalist factions lost seats in EP parliament but still managed to secure five seats. Progressive voters still trusted these parties’ abilities to shape the EU on green and red issues that DiEM was campaigning on.

As a second structural factor, indications suggest that voters did not radically want to depart from the path Germany had taken in Europe and were overall content with Germany’s role in the EU. In autumn 2018, only 28% of German respondents answered that the EU should change rapidly (which was DiEM25s position), while 61% were in favour of moderate reform pace (Eurobarometer,

2019: 10). The poll shows that on average Germans want slower change than the European average which showed that 36% were in favour of rapid change. In the same poll, German respondents also disproportionately predicted that stability for the year ahead. 71% of Germans expected that their lives will not change fundamentally in the coming 12 months (compared to only 58% in EU average). Inflation and pensions are the most pressing personal issues that German voters cared about (Eurobarometer, 2019: 13). These issues were not substantial part of debates in Germany at the EP elections. With DiEM25 calling for a rupture with the status quo in Europe, the above indicators suggest that the average voters were not feeling the same degree of urgency. Combined with the strong electoral results of the Greens and moderate results for the Left party there was not enough political space for a small insurgent party.

In the other European countries where DiEM25 put its programme to the ballot box no seats were secured either. Varoufakis himself analysed that ‘our campaign speeches were far too timid’ and that what was missing was ‘a class analysis of the true reasons why Europe’s establishment is turning down sensible, moderate policies ... that would be mutually advantageous across Europe’ (Varoufakis, 2020: 2). Indeed, the closest that DiEM25 got to a seat in the EP was in Greece where the DiEM25 party Mera25 very narrowly failed to reach the three percent threshold, but won nine seats in the Greek national elections of 2019 with Varoufakis as lead candidate (Smith, 2019).

Electurally, after the European elections, DiEM25’s success in Greece in 2019 stands out. There were few DiEM25 supported candidates contesting for the French municipal elections and elsewhere. If DiEM25 will contest in upcoming elections will be subject to all-member-votes. On the part of the voters, this creates a level of uncertainty because of the case-by-case nature in which DiEM25 contests for elections. Depending on the local groups there is also an appetite to organize political campaigns that are not affiliated to party politics and a certain degree of frustration about electoral results in 2019. If DiEM25’s electoral campaigns will succeed in the future will also depend on if the three challenges of organizational complexity, lack of resources and reluctance of the membership to embrace electoral politics will be addressed.

## Conclusion

On 26 May 2019, the day of the EP elections, *Demokratie in Europa* attracted 130.229 votes (Bundeswahlleiter, 2019). A little less than double the votes would have secured a seat in the EP. In only two out of sixteen provinces in Germany the party received enough seats to enter parliament (Berlin and Hamburg). Small successes in these city-states as well as in other cities with committed volunteers clearly points to a correlation between concerted efforts and election results.

In some sense electoral politics was an uneasy subject for DiEM25 from the start. As DiEM25 grew out of a movement it had always allowed members to be active in other political parties. Now that DiEM25 was running an election campaign this put some members sympathizing with other parties in conflict either to change party affiliation or campaign against DiEM25.

After contextualizing the events, processes and actors that shaped DiEM25's decision to contest in the European elections, I discussed three stages of the campaign. From inception the organization of the campaign was enabled and constrained by its pan-European ambition and collaborative character. Because the DiEM25 campaign was fought with more than one logo and an alliance of different parties as well as prominent DiEM25 supporters who were not on the ballot box this might have caused difficulties explaining the campaign to voters. The message that the exact same policy programme can be elected from seven different countries was not auditable enough even though it was a unique selling point of the campaign.

The analysis showed that electoral politics for movement parties might be difficult if the focus is on the movement and electoral politics perceived only a necessary evil. For example, Frederiksson Almqvist (2016: 104) suggests that in the Pirate Party 'the primacy of institutionalized politics is not only a pragmatic choice by the most dedicated party activists but also consistent with the political imagination of their less organizing followers'. The same cannot be said about DiEM25's relation to electoral politics.

As I have also shown, movement parties must be understood in the context of a particular political juncture. At the beginning of the campaign challenging

the political machinery of existing political parties already seemed like a mountain to climb. I write this analysis knowing that some of the challenges presented here were already discussed when the decision to contest elections were taken. Still there was a great appetite to intervene and a felt necessity to defy the political odds. DiEM25 supporter Slavoj Žižek captures this urge to shift the political landscape nicely:

One has to take the risk and intervene, even if reaching the goal appears (and is, in some sense) impossible – only by doing this can one change the situation so that the impossible becomes possible, in a way that can never be predicted. (Žižek, 2018: 9)

This research paper contributed by analysing internal organizational dynamics within a particular movement party. For future research, it would be necessary to better understand the particular subject positions of volunteers and candidates in movement party campaigns and how they might interpret their role differently from traditional party candidates.

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