## Marsili: Remain to change is DiEM's message [Interview]

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Jakub Dymek June 23, 2016



Jakub Dymek: Let's start with your involvement with the Democracy in Europe Movement (DiEM25). How and why did you become involved?

Lorenzo Marsili: Nine years ago I was one of the founders of European Alternatives, an organization which was founded with the belief that we had to construct transnational political capacity for citizens and civil society & social movements, in order to regain sovereignty over our future, and to define the policy and politics that define us. In particular those politics that are way beyond the nation state, as they already were nine years ago. From an activist's perspective, I was focusing on democratization, social movements and democracy on a European level. When DiEM25 came about I was extremely happy to find somebody as charismatic and as popular as Yanis Varoufakis responding to the capitulation of SYRIZA and the success of the Troika's blackmail against Greece in 2015. Yanis is somebody who instead of giving up proposes radical democratization of the EU itself. He proposes a way to reform the EU that isn't nationalistic, but is, on the contrary, pan-European and progressive. I was involved with

organizing DiEM's launch in Rome, and from then onwards I've been in close contact with Yanis and Srecko [Horvat, of DiEM25]. DiEM doesn't have an organizational structure as of yet, so I cannot say what my formal role is – we're working towards establishing it.

We've already had a lot of debates, meetings and assemblies – you at European Alternatives have organized a fair few of them, which have been highly effective. There is no doubt that the left is good at talking. Why do we need to have DiEM to do similar things?

## Lorenzo MARSILI

is the co-founder and Director of European Alternatives. He is the initiator and current spokesperson of the European Initiative for Media Pluralism, an international campaign demanding better protection for media pluralism and freedom at European level.

Oh, yes, we're good at that!

There's one similarity between the already existing organizations, including European Alternatives and DiEM. DiEM wants to be a platform, which facilitates actions by various groups and helps them to be in touch with one another and to develop common approaches to political challenges. EA already does this and has been doing this, in my opinion, quite successfully for the past years. We've been in touch with grassroots movements and citizens on the ground: from Portugal to Poland and Britain to Bulgaria. Transnational cooperation was always a thing we wanted to make possible, as we believe that change is going to come from joining forces on the ground and beyond national boundaries.

In terms of the differences: DiEM has to take a much more direct political role. It has to present a very clear political vision and to take up political fights, during and regardless of elections, to achieve that vision. For example, this includes working with political parties to accomplish that vision, whereas the EA doesn't mingle with them. DiEM already has members who are important political leaders, like Katja Kipping, the leader of Die Linke, John McDonald, the shadow chancellor in Jeremy Corbyn's cabinet and Caroline Lucas from the British Green Party. In addition to this, they include local leaders like Ada Colau in Barcelona. DiEM works to empower the broad political left, green, liberal and progressive forces in order to come to the next European elections with a strong political proposal of constitutional transformation of the EU.

How can this change be achieved using the powers and means at our disposal today, as well as within the limitations of the EU's institutional framework? "Transformation" is a big word.

True, but the transformation is already happening. One thing that has changed over the last few years is that a certain static vision of Europe has ended. We no longer live in the third wave times of Blair and Clinton when all the parties maintained the status quo and when everybody was behaving like there was no alternative. The status quo is crumbling because of what is happening with the Euro and within the Eurozone in general: this financial cage, which Europe designed for itself, is finally coming to light and being challenged. We're witnessing not only financial and material decomposition of the

European project, but also a political decline of mainstream forces with the rise of far right parties everywhere, from Hungary to France. This is presenting itself to the mainstream with pressing questions like Brexit, the refugee crisis and questions over sovereignty.

We believe that change is going to come from joining forces on the ground and beyond national boundaries.

We don't really have the option to keep things as they were, we're living through times of great turbulence and things are going to change. We need to be able to guide that change in a way that is humane, egalitarian and beneficial to European societies. For that we need a clear proposal for the future; one that not only traditionally leftist forces can rally around. The time to present it is short. This proposal has to include responses to problems of inequality as well environmental challenges and technological questions concerning topics such as innovation and development in Europe. Besides that, such a proposal has to outline a constitution for Europe, which can be understood as a way in which citizens can influence and take part in the decisions on their future. This is difficult, for sure. DiEM hopes that we can build a coalition of political and social forces capable of working towards this, starting by organizing a constitutional assembly to draft the new constitution. This isn't as far fetched as it may sound as there's already talk of treaty change; everybody understands that the way the EU is now structured is no longer working so change is going to happen anyway. Either this change is coming to us top-down, from Mr Schauble and Mrs Merkel (and the far right that is going to govern France a couple of years from now) or it is going to happen bottom-up, by a democratic, participatory process.

I don't know the data for all the countries, but in Poland the participation in European elections is extremely low – around 18%. And yet you're talking about getting people engaged in a process that is complicated, multi-layered, even hard to grasp.

First of all, there's a difference between electing a European Parliament, which has extremely limited powers over how policies are made and the genuine political process that includes lots of people in the discussion over what kind of society we are going to live in. We're focusing on creating enthusiasm and engagement for the latter – which is very different from elections. If we frame the question about Europe not in terms of bureaucracy, but around the discussion of how we would like our future to look, that's a different discussion to have, right? People care about issues, the rise of the far right actually demonstrates that there's a level of politics that affects everybody and it is politically wise to communicate on that level, too, instead of keeping up with the bureaucratic newspeak and official rhetoric.

We're in a time of political apathy and it's crucial how it ends.

We need an ambitious new left in Europe – à la Podemos, à la Corbyn. Click to Tweet

Phenomena such as an extraordinary turnout in Austrian elections and Bernie Sanders in the United States show us that in certain places this time is already ending; we're witnessing new highs of participation and this is happening where there is a new political conflict, where alternatives are emerging and polarization becomes real. Our task is, of course, to help the alternatives on the left take shape and become viable political options – contrary to the usual status quo parties of the centre-right and left.

## Are you convinced of the apparent decline of the centrist parties?

They're dead. The moment when the status quo no longer holds, when traditional liberal-democratic capitalism is failing more and more people, when the expectations and aspirations of tens and hundreds of millions of people cannot be fulfilled, when there is a complete lack of responses towards the biggest challenges of our time, combined with the spectacle of praising today's system and trying to convince people that everything is going as planned is both sad and hilarious. They are doing this by barricading themselves in a castle of status quo against everybody who actually presents demands towards the political sphere – be it the far right or figures such as Pablo Iglesias and Jeremy Corbyn. There's no sense in defending what is already indefensible. This is a recipe for disaster. Sooner or later this castle will be defended and taken. Hopefully by likes of Iglesias rather than Farage or Le Pen. Otherwise Kaczyński or Orban can conquer the centre.

## Those two already govern.

Yes, and it is entirely possible that a party like PiS or Fidesz will gain significant influence and power in other countries. The response to this needs to be twofold. We need an ambitious new left in Europe – à la Podemos, à la Corbyn. Walking zombies (i.e. social democracies) in many countries in Europe, also need to wake up and turn against the system, before they go down the route of Greece's PASOK. They have to take the reformist stance, too. Otherwise, as has been seen in Greece and Spain, they will barely take 51% of the mandate even with all mainstream forces, including the right, on board with them.

You speak about the decline of social democrats and centre-left forces. It is true that this is the case in many countries. But Europe is diverse politically; Central and Eastern Europe for example never developed anything even comparable to the strong social democratic parties of 70s and even 80s in the West. The left, when it was conceived in our part of Europe after 1989, was compromised in the moment of its inception and later corruption scandals – like those in Poland and Hungary – only added to that. Does DiEM recognize those differences? Skepticism towards the EU or presenting a critique of its workings, as DiEM and parts of the western left do, in new member states can work against the intention, thereby strengthening the far right and alienating the left from parts of the liberal forces that remain pro-Brussels.

There's not only an East-West divide, but also South-North: Scandinavian systems are different than those of Portugal and Greece. We have to look at the puzzle of differences that the EU is made of, regardless of geographical categories. Is Greece Western Europe? Well, in a sense it is, but with the memory of a dictatorship 30 years ago and a failing economy today. Instead of focusing on the difference between the post-socialist part of Europe and the rest, we're trying to be aware of all regional and transnational differences and treat them all seriously. Take Catalunia for example – Catalunia is different from Castillia. Political work needs to be adapted to that.

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That being said, I also want to point out that there's a trend of increasing polarization in the whole of Europe; mainstream and status quo parties are declining in every country. Parties that used to believe in neoliberal governance are shrinking in terms of public support and this opens up space for new forces. Poland's PiS isn't interesting because of its ability to take the nationalist, racist and xenophobic vote – parties of the right almost always had the ability to do so – but that it took many proposals and ideas from the new left. The social policy of PiS is recognizable outside of Poland as something taken from the anti-austerity movement's agenda: reforming the retirement age, support for working mothers and fathers, responding to housing crisis. It only shows us that the previous approaches stopped working and this is the avenue to replace them.

There are a number of easy, non-controversial, stances to take on the left: we need social justice and worker's rights. We can all agree on that. But what about issues that prove to be problematic? Tell me, what is DiEM's point of view regarding the war in Ukraine and its possible accession to the EU?

There isn't one. There are many issues on which we don't have readymade statements. DiEM is a start-up in some senses; we want to develop in a way that is constantly being remade from the inside and spontaneous. We don't want to have a stance, because one, two or three people decided that we have to have one. We're a movement that wants to achieve a shared approach towards border and neighboring policies of the EU, and between Ukraine and Russia. But we also want to reach conclusions through the participatory process.

OK, I'm not saying you have to have a clear answer to everything, to play a 'besserwisser' i.e. a know-it-all. On the other hand, though, being a movement consists of having ideas that people want to share and are willing to join because of them. Movements usually stand behind something. If I was somebody who thought that helping Ukraine to join the EU and undergo a peaceful political and economic transition is a crucial issue for Europe today and the left in particular, I'd be rather skeptical towards a movement that cannot express if they're for or against that, don't you agree?

You just described a perfect way of how DiEM needs to function. We need a movement that doesn't express the views of only a couple of people in its highest ranks, but where the people who are close – geographically, politically and emotionally – to contemporary problems bring them to the agenda and make them important within the whole European project we're trying to develop. This is how we can have a shared stance and concrete proposals.

All of what you've just highlighted, including the importance of Maidan, is what should be presented and argued for in Europe by people from the region and beyond. The idea that we need more cooperation with Ukraine and an actual, meaningful partnership is a valid argument that has to be taken up within DiEM and hopefully throughout Europe. I think you're entirely right, yet I think that this stance cannot come from one person's arbitrary decision. It's the members who have to lead the movements.

Speaking of divisions. Would you agree that the Brexit debate has once again reshuffled the political sphere according to the binary question – for or against the EU? Such a development makes it harder to present nuanced arguments, like that of DiEM.

Thankfully, there's a third option.

There is none in the referendum, I'm afraid.

Yes, the referendum is polarizing and is dividing people along the lines of "for" and "against". Most of the time, at least. But the campaign "Another Europe is Possible", led by a number of prominent politicians and personalities, counts as a big success. This is also about presenting the argument that while we don't want to leave, we aren't supporting today's status quo and don't want to uphold it. The third option is essentially the message we have to put forward and it serves to keep the door open for debate and cooperation with other politicians towards the goal of reforming the EU. Leaving the EU doesn't present British people with any progressive options; the scrapping of worker's right and criminalizing migration, including that from the EU, are two of the most imminent consequences and it is because of them the right is campaigning for Brexit. Leaving the EU would leave Great Britain extremely weak against any future challenges including the TTIP, which only cooperation on a broader level can influence. Remain to change is the message and DiEM's position – remain to change, not to leave the things as they are.

How can we make these proposals for reform clearly visible and understandable for people? Even when the EU tried to tackle problems like youth unemployment, there was not much support or even public interest in it. One has to do visible things, it seems. What will you do?

This is what DiEM stands for: real policy that influences real people's lives.

The economic response towards the crisis was extremely weak. We're discussing something like 0.1 or 0.2 percent of budget reconstruction here or there, and a little investment. It's insufficient, depressing even. For more and more people, it's clear that we need a system that delivers on its promise. And I will give you now one idea that can be applied here and now, as well as being understandable and clear to almost everybody. The European Central Bank emits around 80 billion Euros in buying government bonds from financial institutions every month in the hope that the money will end up on the market or boost investment. What happens instead is that the institutions are using that money only to buy another financial instrument. So the European Central Bank is basically giving away free money to the financial institutions, while the growth and investment stagnates and people don't see any tangible results of such a policy. Instead of that, the EBC could spend that money with the European Investment Bank, which in turn could support investment in a continental green revolution based on new technologies, as well as other investments in public infrastructure and projects; not building one train station or stadium here and there, but creating a European New Deal at a time when rates are at a historical low. The money is there; we need to start pouring it into the real economy. This is what DiEM stands for: real policy that influences real people's lives.

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