



IETM REPORT

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# TRANSNATIONAL UNIONS TO REVIVE DEMOCRACY

Report from the IETM Munich Plenary Meeting, 1 – 4 November 2018

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# *Transnational unions to revive democracy*

Europe is in crisis: political, economic, humanitarian, and environmental, but also, a crisis of imagination. That was the common starting point from where the moderator opened the session and the speakers presented their alternative political and civic projects aimed at reinventing Europe and reviving democracy. As Ivana Nenadović said, if there is nobody else doing it for you, you have to step out of your comfort zone and do it yourself.

Let's not just change leaders and parties, let's change the system altogether – by returning democracy to its sovereign: the citizens. Contrary to the populist focus on the nation-state or the EU-centrist models, the speakers sought for a solution in building transnational unions that bring citizens closer while keeping their regional identities and reinforcing civil societies across Europe. And what would be a more powerful tool for reinventing the system than art?

## *DiEM25 places arts and culture at the centre of its vision for a better Europe*

Ivana works as a producer at the National Theatre in Belgrade, Serbia. Her reason to join the DiEM25 movement was the search for the sense of freedom and sharing common values.

The movement's mission, to democratise Europe, to bring transparency in decision-making, and to reform the system, is reflected in the way it functions. DiEM25 was founded as a bottom-up movement, governed by a coordinating collective of 12 members, half of which are renewed each year by elections. The coordinating collective is supported by an advisory panel



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### Speakers:

Ivana Nenadović, member of the DiEM25 Coordinating Collective, Serbia

Daphne Büllesbach, Executive director of European Alternatives, Germany

Jonas Staal, artist, New Unions, the Netherlands

### Moderator:

Chris Keulemans, writer and journalist, the Netherlands

of well-known influential personalities and a validating council of 100 DiEM25 members selected by sortation from a pool of self-nominated candidates. At DiEM25, it is the programme and the guiding principles that govern the decision-making. This ensures its consistency and integrity no matter who the leader is, Ivana stated.

DiEM25 has constituted itself in 2016 as a pan-European movement, as they believed the crises Europe was facing

couldn't be resolved on a national level. Following a multistep consultation procedure within the movement, DiEM25 develops whitepapers on topics like transparent government across Europe, a pan-European constitution, new forms of employment and distribution of income, technological sovereignty, ecological transition, refugees and migration, new vision for culture. These whitepapers are integrated into their Progressive Agenda for Europe. The European New Deal,

another joint endeavour of DiEM25, proposes a new framework “for Europe’s stabilisation, sustainable recovery & democratisation”, as it states.

These policy frameworks are part of the constructive disobedience, which Ivana praised highly in DiEM25’s strategy. For an act of disobedience to be constructive, according to DiEM25, it needs a counter-proposal which outlines alternative policies or directives to those that are disobeyed. Additionally, if adopted across Europe, the proposed measures should not cause any part of Europe to suffer.

Disobedience, be it even a constructive one, will not save Europe from disintegrating. “We need to try and change the system from within”, Ivana pleaded. “We need to enter the institutions and take the challenge to reform them.” For that purpose DiEM25 has established its ‘electoral wing’ that will take part in the European Parliament Elections in 2019, while complying with the principles of transnationality and inclusive and participatory policy design. But then, how to translate the hefty policy papers into compelling messages that can be communicated with people from a broad spectrum of political beliefs and professional backgrounds in all countries of Europe? How to open up a space for a democratic dialogue, which DiEM25 believes will empower European citizens? How to imagine the future of Europe together?

DiEM25 sees the answer to these questions in the arts: “For us, art plays an integral role in determining not only the means (propagation) but also the ends of our movement; art is not only the medium [...] but it also, contributes to shaping the policy/message itself.” The artistic platform of the movement, DiEM Voice, was launched with the aim to facilitate a democratic dialogue between people across Europe, using art. Ivana invited IETM members and other meeting participants to contribute to the platform or to have a say in the ongoing conversation at DiEM25 about culture in Europe.



New Unions Act I-V, project by Jonas Staal (Image: Dorothea Tuch)

### *European Alternatives suggest transnational initiatives*

European Alternatives is another non-profit civil movement that defines itself “beyond the nation state” and aims to “promote democracy, equality and culture beyond the nation state”. Daphne Büllsbach, Executive director of the movement, presented its core values and its strategy to reimagine Europe by fostering solidarity, creativity and critical thinking for a better future – “a vision that doesn’t only deal with our today, or even our tomorrow but the day after tomorrow”.

European Alternatives believe that going beyond the nation state can promote a more democratic, equal and culturally open society. At the same time, reclaiming the political agency of the citizens over a reimagined European Union will empower local and regional entities far better than the right-wing urge to close borders and return to the nation-state. In a moment where pressures of nationalists arise across Europe and even beyond, European Alternatives provide a space to build connections between people who want to forge a way for a different Europe, one that is forward-looking and takes the European values seriously. Two examples could be the vision for a European unemployment scheme or insisting on

save-ports for migrants passing through the Mediterranean Sea.

European Alternatives insist on staying a civic movement that is open to all who share their objectives and values. The movement develops campaigns, public events, publications, research, activities promoting active citizenship, projects, and trainings.

Daphne invited the session’s audience to contribute to two of those events, Transeuropa festival and #EuropeanMay.

Transeuropa is a bi-annual festival of culture, arts and politics that takes place in different cities across Europe. In October 2019, the festival will be held in Palermo, Italy, and its programme is open for input.

#EuropeanMay is designed to be a string of common transformative actions that will take place in every town and city in Europe and beyond, during the first quarter of May 2019, just before the European Parliament elections. The event format is open: occupations, demonstrations, strikes, disruptive actions, discussions, performances, exhibitions... “any non-violent action to create a political climate change”. #EuropeanMay is a joint initiative of The European Moment, European Alternatives, DiEM25, European Collective and more.

## How to campaign for reimagining Europe

Jonas Staal is a visual artist strongly interested in the relationship between art, democracy, and propaganda. He focused his presentation on the techniques of creating political campaigns, proving that “artistic imagination precedes political transformation: political ideas do not come to reality before being imagined and then staged”.

Propaganda art is not an exclusive domain of the political left, Jonas reminded. His project [Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective](#) (2018) explored the movies of [Steve Bannon](#), film director, media executive, former banker, chief strategist of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, informal advisor to the Bolsonaro campaign in Brazil, and a founder of [The Movement](#), aiming to promote far-right populism in Europe before the European Elections in 2019. By deconstructing the mechanisms of Bannon’s propaganda art, Jonas outlined several symbolic motives (ticking clocks, sharks, storms, burning banknotes, and so on) that shaped the core narratives of Trump’s presidential campaign. Bannon described his works as aimed at overwhelming the audience, his inspiration being the films of Sergey Eisenstein, Leni Riefenstahl, and Michael Moore.

So, how to create counter-narratives in the form of what Jonas called “emancipatory propaganda art”? For too long “propaganda art” has been associated predominantly with the Stalinist socialist realism and the Nazi propaganda. In a grim way, Steve Bannon’s work demonstrates the power of art to communicate ideas and capture people’s imagination. If he is the propaganda artist of the new right, who would be the propaganda artist(s) of the new left? And what would be that new inclusive, pluralistic, progressive, and visionary narrative?

The pursuit of such narrative has led Jonas to starting the collaboration between his artistic and political campaign [New Unions](#) (2017) and [DiEM25: New Unions Act I-V](#), [New Unions DiEM25 Athens](#),



Stills from Steve Bannon's film *Generation Zero* (2010). *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective*, 2018. Artist: Jonas Staal. Image: Remco van Bladel and Jonas Staal

[New Unions DiEM25 Amsterdam](#). The project opened up space to exit the status quo of the binary opposition of far-right nationalism vs. eurocratic austerity elite and to offer new alternatives: “New Unions argues for the need for third, fourth, fifth options in the form of alternative scenarios for transnational unionisation”. The New unions campaign aims to trigger imagination, create new spaces, new utopias, new symbols, new poetic

language that excite and inspire change. “Let’s stop talking about politics as a failed administrative exercise, but create a new political imagination that is linked with the artistic imagination”, Jonas Staal pleaded.

## General discussion

### The discussion started from what those counter-narratives could be.

Daphne noted that indeed, it seems easier to speak about building walls than about seeking common solutions and building up a fair and coherent integration strategy for newcomers. Nonetheless, she argued, there are some successful examples of communicating the ideas of transnational citizenship. For instance, many cities (Barcelona, Naples and others) are bringing up local level initiatives that promote working with civil platforms on common topics like housing and the invasion of AirBnB or reclaiming public space to communal use. According to Daphne, the narrative of the commons, initiated by the [Europeans Commons Assembly](#), appeals to many citizens regardless of their political views, so we might take a lesson and focus on those issues that are close to the everyday life.

In terms of the left-wing narratives, Ivana and Jonas agreed that new policies addressing everyday issues like housing or basic income dividend are appropriate ways to distinguish their thinking from other political alternatives, including other left-wing movements, and to communicate with wider audiences. But it is also worth finding ways to share ideas like technological sovereignty, through open source software or the [European New Deal](#) agenda for rationalising Europe's economy.

"The narrative is the content but also, the way you present yourself, the way you step into dialogue." Chris Keulemans noted.

### Far right narratives reside on fear. Could we source out other emotions to build our narratives upon?

Following the invitation to reimagine the emotional stance of that new narrative, Nan van Houte, Secretary General of IETM, shared the concern that the current situation in Europe, with its quick rise of nationalism and far-right hate speech, does not allow enough time to counter fight the fear by recreating trust. The progressive movements' communication strategy may

need to resort to that fear but aim it in the right direction and clearly show what would happen if we do not react now.

Jonas agreed that the far right has quite effectively hijacked public imagination and has instilled fear. They have made us afraid of refugees, EU policies and restrictions, of losing 'our civilization'. But what if we show who the real enemies are: the banks, corporate interests, the environmental catastrophe that is inevitable if we do not take measures now... On longer terms, we need to fight the dystopian vision of the far right with new utopian visions of the world as a safer, more solidary and a brighter place to live in.

### How to communicate with those who share a different, sometimes an opposite view?

Rivka Rubin, director of Imag?ne, UK, argued that, if transnational civic unions want to constitute a new Europe, they need to step out of the old fruitless argument of right vs wrong. "Otherwise we will enter the old spiral of accusations and mutual denial. And no dialogue would be possible."

Henk Keiser, Rural Forums, Denmark, stressed on the fact that in Europe, 40-50 percent of the population live in rural areas, and those people feel unheard. This makes them a target for all sorts of populists who further aggravate the dangerous divide between urban and rural communities. On the other hand, rural communities still stay together, they share a 'natural solidarity' that is yet another powerful tool to reimagine the common future of Europe – especially in the light of promoting local communities instead of nation-states.

Riccardo Olivier, Fattoria Vittadini, Italy, brought up the alarming case of Domenico Lucano, the pro-refugee mayor of Riace, who was arrested on suspicion of abetting illegal migration soon after the right-wing populist party in Italy started implementing a series of austerity measures against refugees. Could a constructive dialogue be still possible in such situation?

Another question raised was how to communicate the concepts of the

transnational civil, supposedly left-wing unions in post-Communist countries where 'left' was and still is associated with something retrograde, totalitarian, oligarchic and corrupted.

Indeed, terms such as democracy, socialism and leftism need to be reinvented to move away from the current negative stigmas linked to them in many parts of Europe. Ivana agreed as someone coming from ex-Yugoslavia. In terms of being open for dialogue with political opponents, Daphne stated that European Alternatives are willing to engage in conversation with anyone but the alt-right neo-Nazi supporters. As of keeping the narrative consistent throughout various and sometimes opposing mindsets, Jonas suggested to seek for the least common denominator that would bring together people of different backgrounds - rural and urban, post-communist, post-colonial, and post-capitalist.

### What can we do: concrete artistic proposals

With the remark that powerful enemies should be more interesting for the arts, Chris invited the participants to suggest concrete proposals for Transeuropa festival and #EuropeanDay in May 2019.

Ten concrete proposals have been generated:

- A play on Brexit's leave position that could be presented at Transeuropa festival. Many plays about Brexit are being staged in the UK, almost all of which defend the remain point of view. People who voted leave should also be heard. ([Bruch Stroke Order, UK](#))
- Giving space to present the transnational unions ideas and policies at the Rural forums and at the rural hubs. ([Rural Forum Denmark](#))
- A suggestion to use the already set programming schemes to address the audience: by adding the DiEM25 logo or sharing a short info about the transnational unions before/ after a performance.

- Joining DiEM25's artistic creation process by contributing with video editing and video shooting, translation and so on.
- Joining the movement and/or developing art productions for the DiEM25 Voice platform.
- Joining #EuropeanMay initiative by suggesting any artistic action that will take place within the timeframe 1-9 May 2019. (contact Daphne Büllsbach: [d.buellesbach@euroalter.com](mailto:d.buellesbach@euroalter.com))
- Invitation to start a conversation for changing the language: Upwording project. ([Imag?ne](#), UK)
- Invitation to take an artistic residency at Mondego Art Valley in rural Portugal to rethink the rural. ([Association Dominio Vale do Mondego](#), Portugal)
- Invitation to take part in [IETM Satellite Milan 2019](#), which falls on the dates of #EuropeanMay