

Volt Europa: A Transnational Model of Representation in the EU Multilevel Party Field?

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Abstract

Volt Europa emerged in 2017 as a transnational political party with aspirations to become the first established EU political party. Volt emerged not as a federation of national parties—as the existing “Europarties”—but as an aspiring pan-European party. In doing so, Volt challenged the pre-existing national representative logic of European politics, presenting itself as an alternative to the dominant party models in EU politics. Yet, to what extent does Volt Europa represent a genuinely alternative model? To answer this question, we identify three Europarty models in the EU: national, supranational, and transnational. While the former two express the EU’s classic representative dichotomy, the latter could be a genuine innovation if implemented. We then explore Volt’s trajectory, focusing on its ideology, discourse and organisation through extensive document analysis and semi-structured interviews. We find that, despite meaningful attempts at establishing a transnational organisation, it largely reproduces the national vs. supranational dichotomy that characterises the EU’s approach to democracy, while maintaining centrist-technocratic politics and a strong German–Dutch anchoring. Therefore, we conclude that, while Volt is an important case study of innovative political practices at the supranational level, it falls short of presenting a convincing alternative model: its combination of supranational and transnational elements rather highlights the limits of trickle-down representative innovation when faced with the European political field’s structural dynamics.

Keywords

democracy; EU; Europarties; Europeanisation; EU multilevel party field; party politics; political parties; transnational politics; Volt Europa

1. Introduction: The Rise of Transnational Politics in the EU During the 2010s

During the mid-2010s, the advent of the Eurozone crisis, the so-called “refugee crisis” and the growing politicisation of the EU increasingly intertwined European politics with national politics. During the 2015 Greek parliamentary elections, Spanish left-wing Podemos leader Pablo Iglesias campaigned in support of the Syriza leader Alexis Tsipras. In 2016, the Brexit referendum made the EU the central issue of British politics for the following years. The contestation of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the EU and the US became widespread across the European public spheres (Oleart, 2021; Rone, 2020). In 2017, Emmanuel Macron was elected as French president on an explicitly pro-European political platform (and following a “start-up” model of political party) designed to confront far-right Eurosceptic Marine Le Pen.

These transnational developments help to understand the emergence of the first two transnational political parties in the EU: the Democracy in Europe Movement 25 (DiEM25) and Volt Europa. These two parties emerged as not just federations of national parties, similar to the existing EU political parties, but as full-fledged integrated parties (Panayotu & Katsambekis, 2022). DiEM25 was founded in 2016 by Yanis Varoufakis as an attempt to channel European left-wing energy after Syriza’s surrender following the 2015 Greek bailout referendum (see Oleart & Weisskircher, 2025). DiEM25 ran in the 2019 and 2024 European elections, but did not succeed in electing a single member of the European Parliament (MEP), and its only representatives were elected in the 2019 Greek parliamentary election. Volt Europa was founded contemporaneously to DiEM25, in March 2017, but at the time did not have the visibility of DiEM25: there was no comparable popular figure to Varoufakis in Volt. Nevertheless, Volt first elected an MEP in the 2019 EU elections, and went on to elect national representatives in the Netherlands and Bulgaria, and increased its representation in the European Parliament (EP) to 5 MEPs in 2024. In doing so, Volt presented itself as an alternative model that challenged the predominant national representative logic of European politics (Leruth, 2021).

However, presenting oneself as a challenge and actually being a challenge are two separate things. Therefore, in this article, we ask: To what extent does Volt Europa represent an alternative to the existing model of political representation in the EU? We explore Volt’s trajectory, focusing on its ideology, discourse, and organisation through extensive document analysis and semi-structured interviews. We argue that while Volt is an important case study of innovative political practices at the supranational level, the model it proposes is unlikely to escape the structural dynamics of the EU’s political field (Crum & Fossum, 2009; Pittoors, 2024).

After detailing what we consider to be distinct models of political representation in the EU, we examine the case of Volt empirically and conclude that it does not fundamentally challenge the longstanding national vs. supranational dichotomy that characterises the EU’s approach to democracy. Rather than introducing a fundamentally new model of transnational representation, Volt’s way of “doing politics” largely reflects a classic supranational perspective that ultimately reproduces pre-existing dynamics. It operates within the same institutional constraints as other parties, engages in the same inter-organisational alliance-building, and relies on the same national electoral channels, with its MEPs elected through national lists. Its involvement with Europarties and attempts to influence EU policy thus follow familiar logics of discourse, organisation, and behaviour.

In this sense, Volt rearticulates rather than challenges existing tensions within the EU's political field; its discourse may challenge intergovernmental dominance and promote the idea of a European *demos*, yet its practices remain embedded in the dominant logic of EU democracy. This raises questions as to the extent to which any party operating within a certain framework of rules and norms can simultaneously challenge that framework in any fundamental way. We thus conclude that Volt Europa may be conceptualised as both a product of and a participant in the ongoing negotiation of political representation in a multilevel and transnational context. In doing so, it reproduces and (subtly) reshapes existing models of representation in its effort to articulate cross-border political constituencies and empower pan-European political participation.

2. Volt's Challenge: Three Models of Political Parties in EU Democracy

The complex institutional architecture of the EU polity has provoked academic and political disagreements over whether its nature is primarily supranational or intergovernmental (Norman & Bremberg, 2023; Wolthuis et al., 2025). From the outset, scholars have grappled with whether the EU should be understood primarily through a national lens, where member states remain the central democratic units engaged in intergovernmental bargaining, or through a supranational conception that envisions the EU as a polity with its own democratic legitimacy (Beetz et al., 2025). This has implications in terms of democratic representation and party behaviour: if in a modern democracy representation happens through political parties, what type of party is best suited to fulfil this role in the EU?

This classic dichotomy between a national and a supranational vision of EU democracy (Pittoors, 2024) has led to competing models of Europarties and, to some degree, also maps onto the distinction between top-down and bottom-up Europeanisation of political parties (Börzel, 2005). The national perspective would claim Europarties are bottom-up alliances of nationally rooted party organisations representing their (sub-)national constituencies. Indeed, most established Europarties—such as the European People's Party—were created by national parties coming together to form institutionalised alliances at the European level. These Europarties thus emerged as a new practice by national actors in response to European integration, to then be transferred upwards and become “a common operational logic in the EU system of governance” (Borońska-Hryniewiecka, 2010, p. 76). However, these “party federations” are often considered to be rather elitist (Hertner, 2018) and weak organisations (Van Hecke, 2010)—“in practice little more than secretariats...of national political parties” (Chrysosgelos, 2021, p. 80). Consequently, their ideological discourse and programmatic positions are extensions of the national priorities put forward by their member parties.

By contrast, the supranational perspective argues that Europarties should represent pan-European party organisations engaging the entire EU population as a single constituency. This perspective reverses the direction of Europeanisation: hierarchical party organisations that are formed in a top-down fashion, reproducing the logic of domestic representative democracy at the EU level and expecting this to “trickle-down” and generate adaptation in national politics (Beetz et al., 2025). Accordingly, such parties are run by a “Eurobubble” elite that prioritises EU issues and positions in their discourse and ideology. An example of this type of party is DiEM25, which put forward a populist discourse that began, and organisationally was run, at the European level without real anchoring in national political spaces (Bonfert, 2022; Císař & Weisskircher, 2022; Oleart & Weisskircher, 2025).

However, these two models are based on dichotomous, idealised types of EU democracy. The reality is somewhere in between, where national and supranational politics are intertwined, and a *transnational* dimension enters the mix. This analysis led to the “multilevel parliamentary field” (Crum & Fossum, 2009), a concept that describes the intertwinement between the two channels of political representation in the EU through the European and national parliaments—each with its own dynamics, but related and mutually affected. Building on this perspective, Pittoors (2025) has put forward a new model to understand the agency and organisation of political parties in the EU: the European multilevel party field. The idea is that in EU politics, parties operate in permanent interdependence with others across levels and borders, engaging in embedded competition within the regulatory and normative boundaries set by the multilevel field—highlighting the differential impact of European integration on parties and party families.

The differential impact of European integration on parties has also been emphasised by the Europeanisation literature (Carter & Poguntke, 2010; Ladrech, 2002). Hix and Goetz (2000) describe how European integration reshapes domestic political systems, while others highlight how the European arena offers a new opportunity structure for domestic actors using “Europe” as a way to reinforce their position at the national level (see Marks & McAdam, 1996; Woll & Jacquot, 2010). Crucially, such party Europeanisation can take different forms and shapes. Börzel (2005, p. 47) rightfully argues that Europeanisation should not be understood merely as a top-down mechanism whereby the European level elicits adaptation at the national level, but as a more complex process in which top-down and bottom-up movements each play a role. As Pittoors and Vandeleene (2025) demonstrate in a comparative study of Belgian, Dutch, and Danish parties, party organisations vary in their adaptation to the European level, reflecting strategic adaptation to the multilevel context, shaped by both institutional constraints and individual agency.

Therefore, we identify a third model of Europarty that goes beyond the dichotomy and emphasises the complex transnational character of EU politics (see Table 1). Arguably, this is the most complex model to realise, as it would have to unite top-down and bottom-up practices: effectively maintaining coherence across national branches, while ensuring grassroots input from national constituencies, and framing policy positions from an EU-wide perspective, while connecting this to (sub-)national or even local priorities. An (imperfect) example of such an initiative is the Stop TTIP campaign (Caiani & Graziano, 2018; Oleart, 2021), a coalition of a wide range of civil society organisations, political parties, and trade unions that was well anchored in local communities yet at the same time constituted a single organisation or campaign.

Table 1. Three models of Europarties.

	National model	Supranational model	Transnational model
Foundational logic	Bottom-up creation driven by national elites	Top-down creation driven by EU elites (trickle-down logic)	Top-down creation driven by grassroots engagement
Organisational structure	Loose federated structure of national party organisations	Centralised and hierarchical structure, connecting directly to citizens	Coherent federal structure, balancing central coordination and national/local autonomy
Formulation of goals	(Sub-)national positions and priorities	EU positions and priorities	Balances European perspective with (sub-)national sensitivities

The campaign was essentially a confederation of national campaigns, where national unions, parties, and civil society mobilised on a European issue, but focused their campaigning at the national level, in constant interaction both horizontally with other national campaigns and vertically through EU-level organisations (Bouza & Oleart, 2018). There is much work in this direction of “Europeanisation from below” (see della Porta, 2020; della Porta & Parks, 2018; Imig & Tarrow, 2001) where the EU operates as a political opportunity for national actors to coordinate and Europeanise from the bottom-up, while ensuring strong coordination at the European level.

We are interested in the extent to which Volt is a case of this third model, thereby representing not only an alternative to the classic “party federation” that is currently dominant among Europarties, but also challenging the national-supranational dichotomy inherent in the thinking about EU democracy. To be sure, Volt Europa claims to represent a transnational constituency (Kinski & Crum, 2020) and to challenge the national fragmentation of European elections. Its advocacy for transnational lists and a European demos aligns with cosmopolitan aspirations, and its discourse emphasises the need to create a European political space that transcends national boundaries, positioning itself as a counterweight to the rise of nationalist and Eurosceptic forces. Moreover, by founding an explicitly pan-European party, Volt claims to distinguish itself from other Europarties by situating Greek, Spanish, German, or Swedish citizens within a shared political organisation and providing them with a pan-European party structure. At the same time, the EU political field imposes certain structural dynamics that might hamper Volt’s ambitions, not least the need for EU-level political actors to immerse themselves in the political dynamics of the EP while still remaining alert to national politics.

Parties have traditionally dealt with this challenge by essentially decoupling national and European politics (Pittoors, 2024). Indeed, Europarties have historically been organised as loose collections of national parties. Crucially, although MEPs join political groups in the EP according to ideological affinities, they are nonetheless elected through national channels. The 2014 introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten process, whereby European political families nominate a lead candidate for the Commission presidency, marked an attempt to transnationalise European elections. Jean-Claude Juncker was the first Spitzenkandidat to assume the presidency in 2014, while Ursula von der Leyen, who became President in 2019, was not in fact a Spitzenkandidat. Advocates such as Volt’s Damian Boeselager have similarly promoted the creation of transnational lists to enable citizens to vote directly for European, rather than solely national, parties and candidates. However, the failure to introduce such lists largely reflects member states’ reluctance to redefine political representation at the European level (Crum, 2023). Although some degree of transnational representation exists—through the European Commission, whose members are expected to serve the European interest despite being nominated by member states, and through the EP, where political group membership signals a broader European orientation—the institutional channels of representation remain predominantly national. If Volt were to come through on its promises, it would represent a critical break from these vested practices.

In this article, we aim to scrutinise Volt’s distinctiveness as a genuine alternative model for democratisation and representation in the EU. In other words, does it go beyond being a mere loose “party federation” while avoiding falling into the “trickle-down” logic, or does it stop short at presenting a primarily discursive counterweight to the EU’s classic national-supranational dichotomy? As we elaborate in the methodological and empirical sections, we aim to answer this question by assessing first Volt’s ideological discourse and policy programmes, before evaluating its multi- and cross-level organisational structure.

3. Method: A Qualitative Single Case Study

Our article undertakes a qualitative analysis of the trajectory of Volt Europa as a political party in what constitutes a single case study. We collect data and information from multiple sources and rely on triangulation to ensure accuracy and refine our analysis. We operationalise our empirical analysis by using the “EU mobilization package” (see Oleart & Weisskircher, 2025, p. 1168), which identifies three dimensions of transnational mobilisation:

- (1) The formulation of goals that target both the transnational level and appeal to national or local constituencies, (2) the building of a transnational political organization that is both inclusive and effective, and (3) whether and how to interact with EU institutions.

For the first dimension, we empirically trace their formulation of goals, discourse, and ideology by analysing Volt’s electoral programmes from the 2019 and 2024 EU elections. We performed our document analysis of Volt’s programmes by qualitatively coding whether the proposed solutions followed a top–down logic (that is, whether they focused on EU-led responses), a bottom–up logic (focusing on the national level), or a combination of the two. For the second dimension, we rely on the Volt Europa party statutes and other legal documentation, as well as secondary sources, in order to outline the internal organisational dynamics of the party. The third dimension is embedded across the two subsections analysing the first two dimensions. We complement our textual sources with two semi-structured interviews with Volt officials at both the EU and national levels of the party. Interview 1 is with a Volt member and former candidate of Volt Belgium (the interview took place in November 2025), and Interview 2 is with a member of Volt’s EU staff (the interview took place in December 2025).

When undertaking our analysis, we focus on the extent to which Volt Europa represents an alternative model of political representation in the EU’s multilevel party field, following the typology we put forward in Table 1. Our empirical analysis is rooted in an interpretive paradigm, whereby we are not quantitatively measuring Volt’s discourse and organisation, but rather attempting to capture the underlying imaginary as well as the concrete practices of political representation upon which the party has been built. Crucially, our analysis is focused on Volt Europa, and while we will refer to some of the national branches of Volt, an analysis of national branches merits a study on its own, as meaningful political differences may emerge. For example, Volt Netherlands was identified as covering the pro-nuclear environmentalist niche (see Otjes & Krouwel, 2023), adapting its political messaging to the particularities of a national electorate.

4. Volt Europa’s Supranational Model

4.1. Volt’s Ideology and Political Discourse 2019–2024: Top–Down Centrist Problem-Solving

Volt Europa was founded on 29 March 2017. It is not a date chosen at random, but already indicated its political intent: on that day, the UK officially announced its intention to leave the EU. The co-founders were French Colombe Cahen-Salvador, German Damian Boeselager and Italian Andrea Venzon, and together represented the three biggest member states in terms of population after the UK left, as well as three of the initial European Economic Community countries. This is a first indication that, for Volt, the EU is (or should be) the key issue that structures political conflict. The early justification for Volt from one of its co-founders and the first MEP,

Damian Boeselager, is relevant to making sense of the underlying philosophy with which Volt was created: “It’s absolutely clear that in our national solutions we can’t find the real answer and that we need European solutions to European problems” (Petitjean, 2019).

A clearer outline of Volt’s ideology is traceable through the 2019 Amsterdam Manifesto, which operated as the programme for the 2019 EU elections and provides an interesting initial insight into Volt’s underlying worldview and policies. “Volt was created to re-energise Europe and to solve the issues we all have in common” (Volt, 2019), a framing that situates the party as a “problem-solver” promoting further political integration as the main “solution” to the multiple problems facing Europe. The 2019 Amsterdam Manifesto calls for the establishment of “a federal Europe with a European government, headed by a prime minister elected by the parliament, and with a president elected by the people. This will create a strong, open and transparent European parliamentary democracy” (Volt, 2019, p. 1). Furthermore, this will “enable the creation of real EU political parties. Current EU parties are loose coalitions of national parties, often with conflicting interests; a real EU democracy needs strong parties defending their vision of the future of Europe” (Volt, 2019, p. 1). This is the first indication that Volt’s conception of EU democracy is based on a trickle-down logic, following the Spitzenkandidaten logic but taking it even further.

The 2019 Amsterdam Declaration also includes a wide range of concrete policy proposals, albeit they are all framed uniquely from a European perspective. There are multiple progressive initiatives, such as a call to ensure that “multinationals pay their fair share by collecting a minimum European corporate tax of 15% and harmonising corporate taxation across member states” (Volt, 2019, p. 2), integrating “social and shared housing into the EU cohesion policy” to make housing more affordable or “implementing a minimum standard for universal child benefits across the EU” (Volt, 2019, p. 9). However, the party also includes neoliberal language and proposals that typically align more with the centre-right, such as calls to “boost entrepreneurship and the creation of jobs, by scaling up investments in technologies such as blockchain, big data, artificial intelligence and cloud technologies to help Europe’s strategic sectors to compete globally” (Volt, 2019, p. 4). On migration, Volt argues that the “EU is undergoing a political crisis in its management of migration flows. Undoubtedly, the refugee crisis is a political crisis,” proposing to “manage refugee flows from outside the EU, by setting up a Unified EU Refugee System” and “ensure successful integration and a benefit for the economy” (Volt, 2019, p. 8).

The combination of centre-left and centre-right language and proposals allows Volt to maintain a certain ideological ambiguity that makes the party politically flexible, although it also limits its capacity to anchor itself in the left-right cleavage. Indeed, theirs is a post-ideological approach that emphasises technocratic “fixes” and allows for little room for alternative legitimate visions of what a democratic Europe should be. As Koolstra (2019) noted early on, “Volt suggests that there is no legitimate alternative; their manifesto is a collection of academic research, full of references to ‘best-practices’ and an appeal to the expertise of ‘the best minds and businesses in the field.’” Crucially for us, the Amsterdam Declaration only includes abstract references to the “member states,” with no attempt to formulate goals that may target both the EU and national constituencies. Rather, it is as if the EU is a single political constituency rather than a union of member states that have distinct political cultures.

A direct consequence of Volt’s ideological ambiguity is that, in 2019, after Volt managed to elect (in the German EU elections) one of its co-founders to the EP, the German co-founder Damian Boeselager, they were unsure

of whether to sit at the EU level with the Liberals (renamed “Renew Europe” as of 2019) or with the Greens. The European People’s Party and the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats were sidelined because much of Volt’s discourse was based on leaving behind “old politics,” which mostly entails a critique of the two historically dominant political parties/groups in the EU: the centre-right European People’s Party and the centre-left social democrats. After the 2019 EU elections, there was an internal vote of Volt members to decide on which group to sit in, and Boeselager joined the Greens. During the 2019–2024 legislature, Volt’s MEPs grew to 2, as Sophie int’Velt—who was elected in 2019 through the Dutch liberal party D66 (part of Renew Europe)—announced switching party membership on 16 June 2023. This illustrated the growing popularity of Volt, especially in the Netherlands, where they also elected national representatives. However, in order to have its own group in the EP, the party needed 23 MEPs (25 before Brexit) from at least one-quarter of the member states—nowhere near what Volt even aspired to.

However, there is some evolution in Volt’s ideology and discourse. It initially emerged as an elite and technocratic attempt to move “beyond” ideology—in fact, two of Volt’s co-founders, Boeselager and Venzon, were previously McKinsey consultants, and Boeselager belongs to an old German noble family, the Boeselager. The reproduction of neoliberal ideas and discourse was heavily toned down over time, most likely as a consequence of joining the Greens in the EP rather than Renew Europe, and the growing number of party members. These members were mostly younger people with transnational experiences (either studying through Erasmus or working abroad) who were mobile, with knowledge of different languages, and heavily socialised with EU-related political spaces (see Parito et al., 2025). Indeed, a former Volt candidate attributed the ideological evolution from 2019 to 2024 to the increasing party membership:

The changes you’ve seen are because our party membership has changed. We have grown so much and then a lot of the people maybe have brought with them views that were not present in the party in the Amsterdam Congress. (Interview 1)

Volt’s ideological evolution is visible in its 2024 electoral programme. It began with a reference to better ground Volt in EU member states, arguing that they “bring together the knowledge and perspectives of thousands of people—from Ireland to Romania, from Finland to Malta—to develop evidence-based policies” (Volt 2024^a, p. 3). However, the emphasis remains at the EU level without an attempt to adapt EU policies to the specificities of national or local constituencies. Ideologically, while the emphasis on “innovation and competitiveness” remained, “managing migration” was replaced by calls to “create humanitarian corridors to provide safe passage to vulnerable people, preventing the massive loss of life in the Mediterranean and Atlantic” (Volt, 2024^a, p. 10). Overall, Volt appeared to shift slightly to the left in 2024, for instance, proposing a “regionally cost-adjusted European Basic Income (EBI) that covers basic living expenses while incentivising well-paid work” (Volt, 2024, p. 10). It maintained the focus on building a federal Europe “that is not torn apart by divisive and inhumane nationalist and populist politics. But rather one that is marked by dignity, solidarity, fairness and transparency, in which citizens are empowered to make the changes they seek” (Volt, 2024).

While the close entanglement between the Greens and Volt has contributed to its slightly leftward shift, its main concerns remain very much related to the EU and supranational “solutions”: the “problems” are identified from the top (Brussels) downwards towards the national chapters of Volt.

4.2. Volt as a Multilevel Organisation: A Blueprint Without Foundations?

Since its founding in 2017, Volt has seen a relatively rapid and successful organisational consolidation. By 2018, the party had launched its first national chapter in Hamburg, Germany, and by 2024, it operated in all EU member states and several non-EU countries, including Switzerland and the UK (Volt Europa, 2024). Simultaneously, membership grew steadily, reaching over 30,000 members in 2025 (see Table 2). However, the numbers in Table 1 also illustrate that Volt is effectively a Dutch–German party: almost 90% of Volt’s membership is concentrated in these two countries.

Table 2. Volt members per country on 31 October 2025.

Volt Europa	34,177	Volt Sweden	163	Volt Finland	18
Volt the Netherlands	19,254	Volt Romania	149	Volt Slovenia	15
Volt Germany	10,439	Volt Slovakia	128	Volt Malta	15
Volt Belgium	550	Volt Bulgaria	119	Volt Kosovo	13
Volt Cyprus	454	Volt Switzerland	114	Volt Estonia	11
Volt Portugal	437	Volt Czechia	83	Volt Norway	10
Volt Italia	420	Volt Poland	78	Volt Lithuania	8
Volt Greece	383	Volt Ukraine	71	Volt Hungary	5
Volt Spain	277	Volt Denmark	69	Volt Latvia	2
Volt France	265	Volt Ireland	61	Volt Croatia	2
Volt UK	263	Volt Albania	57		
Volt Austria	211	Volt Luxembourg	33		

Source: Volt Europa, personal communication, January 2026.

Importantly, Volt managed to achieve some small but significant electoral successes (Table 3). Volt’s first major electoral test came during the 2019 EP elections, when it ran in eight countries and secured one seat in Germany, with Damian Boeselager becoming its first MEP. In the same year, Volt also participated in the Belgian federal elections, although without electoral success. Still, the 2019 breakthrough in the EP laid the foundation for further growth, culminating in the 2024 European elections, where Volt ran in 15 countries, won five seats (three in Germany and two in the Netherlands) and garnered over 1.4 million votes (EP, 2024). These results illustrate Volt’s increasing institutional presence at the EU level, where its elected representatives

Table 3. Electoral results of Volt in national and European elections.

Country	Year	Election	Vote share (%)	Seats
Germany	2019	European	0.67	1
Germany	2024	European	2.57	3
The Netherlands	2024	European	5.13	2
Bulgaria	2021 (as part of a coalition)	National	25.46	2
Bulgaria	2023 (as part of a coalition)	National	23.54	1
The Netherlands	2021	National	2.42	3
The Netherlands	2023	National	1.71	2
The Netherlands	2025	National	1.1	1

Note: Elections in which no seats were secured were excluded from the analysis.

joined the Greens/EFA group in 2019 (and then again in 2024). Interestingly, the choice to join this group was as much ideological as it was functional. Our interviewees confirmed that, although ideologically only the Greens/EFA and Renew were really ever on the table, the Greens/EFA offered a number of organisational advantages that Renew did not—crucially, allowing Volt to be assigned particular files despite not being full members of the Greens or the EFA.

From an organisational perspective, however, it is also important to consider who took the final decision. Here, Volt seems very different from most other parties, in the sense that the decision on which EP group to join was finally put to a vote by Volt's individual members. When Volt Europa's leadership—essentially Damian Boeselager and his entourage—took the initiative to explore various group membership options and decided that either Renew or the Greens/EFA were the only two viable options, they put the final decision to Volt's members, of whom 87% voted in favour of joining the Greens/EFA “based on the offer that we were getting from both [EP groups]” (Interview 1). Interestingly, our interviewees indicated that the leadership's initial (ideological) preference went out to Renew, but Volt's members drove the party more to the left and towards the Greens—a direction subsequently accepted and embraced by the leadership.

While the EP remains Volt's primary arena, the party has also competed in national and local elections, signalling its ambition to anchor itself more firmly in political institutions across governance levels. However, its national and local performance reflects both opportunities and constraints in its organisational expansion. The Netherlands provided the most favourable conditions for national representation due to its proportional electoral system and low entry barriers. Volt entered the Dutch House of Representatives (Tweede Kamer) in March 2021 with three MPs, though it fell back to one seat in the most recent elections of October 2025. Bulgaria represents another case of national-level success, albeit through coalition politics. After failing to secure seats in the early 2021 elections, Volt joined the centrist alliance “We Continue the Change” in November 2021, electing two MPs and participating in coalition governments. This partnership continued through subsequent elections, though Volt's representation declined to one MP in April 2023 and disappeared after June 2024. In contrast, attempts to gain national seats in Belgium, Germany, Greece, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Sweden, and the UK have so far been unsuccessful, often due to high electoral thresholds or difficulties in meeting registration requirements. These patterns suggest that Volt's institutionalisation remains strongest at the European level, with national and local successes concentrated in contexts offering structural advantages (the Netherlands) or coalition opportunities (Bulgaria).

What really distinguishes Volt from other (European) parties is that from its very beginning Volt aimed at creating a unified pan-European party, as opposed to the loose coalition of national entities that is typical for Europarties (Fischer & Finkeldey, 2025; Panayotu & Katsambekis, 2022). Moreover, though initially created in a top-down fashion by a handful of EU insiders, Volt explicitly embraced the participatory principle of bottom-up democratisation and member-driven decision-making—as shown in the decision to join the Greens/EFA group. This ambition requires an organisational structure able to manage governance across multiple jurisdictions. Indeed, within the current legal and institutional setting, to create a pan-European party is to face a structural dilemma: how to reconcile strong anchorage in local communities necessary for ensuring citizen engagement and grassroots action, with the centralised coordination required to maintain organisational coherence?

On the one hand, bottom-up governance ensures democratic legitimacy, member engagement, and responsiveness to local contexts. It empowers national/local chapters and fosters a sense of ownership among members, which is crucial for a movement that aspires to transcend national boundaries. Yet, this approach can lead to fragmentation and inefficiencies, especially in organisations spanning multiple jurisdictions with diverse legal frameworks. On the other hand, top-down structures provide strategic coherence, resource optimisation, coordinated branding, and the possibility of legal registration at the European level. However, excessive centralisation risks alienating local chapters and members, thereby undermining the participatory ethos that defines Volt's identity.

Of course, this is a challenge for any political party. Still, other Europarties (explicitly federations of national parties) do not face these challenges to the same degree as Volt (explicitly a transnational party). Moreover, whereas national parties might recognise some of these concerns, they become many times more difficult to manage for Volt Europa, given how it operates in a European multilevel political field where one needs to consider the wide variation in legal, political, cultural, and social dynamics in over two dozen member states (Pittoors, 2024). As if that were not enough, Volt's ambition to be a unified pan-European party goes against the traditional EU model of representation and democracy that favours an upside-down hierarchy, with the national dominating the European (Hix, 2008).

It is no surprise, then, that Volt Europa's current organisational model reflects this tension. Faced with a situation where its various national chapters are in very different stages of organisational development, Volt Europa's statutes and operational documents indicate that it operates as a hybrid structure, combining grassroots participation with centralised governance. At the European level, Volt is led by a board of co-presidents elected by members and supported by thematic teams for policy, communications, and IT. National chapters enjoy autonomy in local campaigning and fundraising, but adhere to common statutes and a shared European manifesto. Decision-making is facilitated through digital platforms such as Loomio for deliberation and Haillo for internal communication, enabling members to vote on leadership positions and policy priorities. General assemblies serve as the highest democratic body, ratifying statutes and strategic decisions. While these mechanisms underscore Volt's commitment to bottom-up governance, both our interviewees and internal documentation highlight that operational challenges persist: uneven participation across chapters, resource imbalances favouring larger sections such as Germany and the Netherlands, and difficulties harmonising compliance with national laws.

Crucially, Volt's leadership is strongly aware of the fact that national chapters need to adapt to national contexts in order to be competitive on national issues during elections, even if the party believes most issues are essentially European in nature:

To win the election, you need to play the game here, and we're like, "Well, but the game here makes no sense." We play national politics and we come here with our European agenda and it's...like you don't even play in the same game. (Interview 1)

For example, on healthcare, "we can give visibility to the problem to find solutions at the European level and suggest better integration of healthcare systems" (Interview 1), but the healthcare system remains a national competence. This highlights the strong structural incentives coming from Europe's political field—it is not only about adhering to a diverging range of national rules; it is also about coordinating positions across very

different political contexts. The interviewees stress that overall there is very little substantive conflict between chapters and levels due to a firm and widespread belief in the core European values of Volt—“the guiding light that we have always is pragmatism and European unity” (Interview 2)—and its inclusive deliberative processes.

Still, a good example of how a Volt chapter can get lost in national political dynamics is Volt Belgium, which is divided into Flemish, Brussels, and Walloon sections, each with its own electoral and organisational strategies. From the very beginning, intra-Belgian tensions complicated Volt Belgium’s functioning as a party. An interviewee involved in Volt Belgium was frustrated by the difficulties in building a common project considering the pan-European nature of Volt: “It’s absurd to be a bold party, a transnational European party, and then start discussing Flanders versus Wallonia” (Interview 1). The interviewee connects this disintegration of Volt Belgium directly to its poor performance in the 2024 EP elections in Belgium, as this led to a misallocation of limited funds for campaigning and communication. As the interviewee says, “what happened in Belgium was basically...caving to the structural issues of the country” (Interview 1). Moreover, despite best intentions, Volt Europa simply did not have the organisational capacity to prevent this kind of disintegration of a national chapter and to maintain transnational ideals in the face of overwhelming national political imperatives.

To address these issues, Volt has introduced top-down measures such as standardised onboarding and integrity guidelines, signalling a move toward greater centralisation. Some centralising dynamics come naturally, for instance, given the greater financial means of Volt Europa and the EP office, “a lot of [national] chapters feed off of the information and communication that [Volt Europa] puts out” (Interview 2). Still, others are purposeful measures. We dig deeper into two particularly illustrative instances: Volt’s financial transparency and its Shine 29 strategy.

First, despite its relatively small number of elected representatives, Volt has achieved a notable degree of professionalisation, particularly evident in its strong fundraising capacity, which points to a solid economic foundation behind the party. While it has launched several GoFundMe campaigns, investigative reports (Corner Späti, 2019; Dold, 2023; L’Ami, 2022) suggest that Volt’s financial sustainability largely depends on a network of affluent donors. In line with its statutes, Volt Europa (n.d.-b) publicly emphasises transparency by disclosing donations above €3,000 on its website, but it is hampered by organisational fragmentation. As Dold (2023) notes, “since Volt Deutschland, Volt Italia, Volt Netherlands, Volt Europa etc. etc. are all separate entities, you have to visit each one’s individual website and find the donations page.” Moreover, internal audit reports presented at Volt’s 2025 General Assembly identified concerns regarding the opacity of external funding sources—concerns which the party so far has not addressed. Consequently, while Volt aims to progress toward greater financial stability—particularly through its pursuit of Europarty registration, which would grant access to EU-level public funding—it remains open to criticism over its dependence on opaque donor networks.

Second, Volt’s (n.d.-a, p. 2) Shine 29 strategy for 2024–2029 blends elements of bottom-up empowerment with top-down coordination. It begins with a strong affirmation of community-driven action: “Every strategic action we take can only be effective if it is community-driven” and frames its main purpose as “to empower and grow our community.” The strategy envisions European spaces where “a thriving and diverse Pan-European community in which all members have equal rights and responsibilities comes to life” (Volt, n.d.-a, p. 8), emphasising local anchoring and committing to “further democratise the General Assemblies

with members having full democratic control” (Volt, n.d.-a, p. 8). These provisions reflect a strong bottom-up orientation aimed at fostering inclusivity and grassroots legitimacy. However, Shine 29 also introduces clear top-down measures to consolidate organisational capacity and strategic alignment, and the fact that the strategy aligns with the EU political cycle illustrates the prioritisation of the EU level over the national ones. Among its core objectives are to “strengthen coordination between Volt Europa and its chapters” and “create clear rules to strengthen teamwork across Volt Europa, its chapters, and organisational bodies” that shall be “more strictly” followed (Volt, n.d.-a, pp. 5, 7). It mandates structural control through the development of “a system of chapter levels” to identify chapters that are “of high strategic potential” (Volt, n.d.-a, p. 9). Leadership alignment is reinforced by the goal to “cultivate European leaders who are highly visible across all our chapters” (Volt, n.d.-a, p. 8), ensuring coherence in messaging and representation. Resource prioritisation is another top-down feature, as Volt Europa is directed to “consolidate and prioritise existing resources” and focus on core tasks (Volt, n.d.-a, p. 9). These measures illustrate the necessity of hierarchical coordination to maintain efficiency and coherence in a transnational context.

As such, Volt’s current organisational setup and future strategy seem to be of two minds, illustrating the challenge of seeking to preserve Volt’s grassroots character while imposing the structural discipline required of a professional, pan-European party. A useful metaphor is that of a bridge: the foundational strength comes from the grassroots community supporting the overall structure, but the engineering blueprint must be centrally coordinated to ensure the whole thing doesn’t collapse and is swept up by the current. So far, Volt Europa has focused on its pan-European foundation, but its increasing experience with the challenge of maintaining organisational coherence in a politically diverse field is triggering a centralist reflex and sidelining a closer relation with grassroots communities, located in national spaces—begging the question of how long Volt Europa can continue walking the tightrope.

5. Conclusion: Old Wine in a New Bottle?

Volt Europa emerged as an attempt to offer an alternative model for political representation in the EU’s multilevel system. Its goal of fostering transnational partisanship (Wolkenstein, 2018) and providing this with a pan-European party structure was certainly discursively innovative and organisationally ambitious. However, we began the article by outlining three distinct models of political representation in the EU: national, supranational, and transnational. We assessed where Volt fits in this categorisation, questioning whether it represents a genuine transnational alternative or instead reproduces the national-supranational dichotomy. To do so, we used the “EU mobilization package,” empirically tracing (a) Volt’s formulation of ideological goals and whether they appealed to both EU and national constituencies and (b) its multilevel political organisation. Based on the qualitative analysis above, we can conclude that Volt exhibits elements of both a transnational and a supranational model.

On the one hand, it attempts to replace national channels of representation with genuine EU politics that are not filtered through the lens of national ones, indicating a more supranational tendency of formulating policy priorities and goals. Its ideology aligns with mainstream pro-European centre-left and centre-right parties. In their emphasis on “fixing problems” and moving away from “old ways” of doing politics, Volt is reproducing the centrist politics of the status quo. Much like Macron’s *La République en Marche* in France and *Ciudadanos* in Spain, Volt initially emerged as an attempt to rebrand centrist politics in a more “modern” and younger fashion. Over time and partially due to its association with the European Greens, they have evolved

towards more left-leaning political positions, yet still reproduce a technocratic conception of democracy that illustrates just how much they are a product of the EU political field, falling in line with traditional supranational “trickle-down” conceptions of democracy (Beetz et al., 2025).

On the other hand, its foundational logic and organisational structure seem to indicate a genuine attachment to transnational ideals, with continued attempts to mediate between grassroots engagement and central coordination—though it is increasingly experiencing the limits that the EU’s political dynamics put to such a part structure, and its more recent organisational developments seem to indicate a move towards a more supranational approach. To be sure, Volt Europa’s organisational ambitions clash with existing electoral rules and politics, and the resilience of national political logics is a big obstacle, as the Belgian case showed. Still, it succeeded in navigating it in the Dutch context—where the threshold and proportional representation make it easier—in Bulgaria—where they managed to strike a coalition with bigger political actors—and at the EU level—where they benefited from the very nature of the elections (albeit only succeeding in Germany and the Netherlands). However, their transnational party organisation does not live up to its pan-European ambitions, and its disconnect from grassroots movements may reproduce the “void” (Mair, 2013) upon which most current parties operate as they are no longer mass membership organisations. Its “trickle-down” reflexes echo Volt’s top-down creation—possibly suggesting its leadership is inspired by a more supranational model than a transnational one. Furthermore, the fact that its member base is located almost entirely in the Netherlands and Germany complicates its claims to be a genuine transnational alternative. There are ideological consequences to Volt Europa’s national anchoring. For instance, possibly due to its strong German anchoring, Volt Europa adopted a pro-Israel position in the aftermath of the deadly Hamas-led attacks on 7 October 2023 and Israel’s genocidal response against Palestinians in Gaza (Amnesty International, 2024). As an illustration, on 13 October 2023 Volt Europa argued that “Israel has not only the undebatable right of self-defence, it has the moral, legal, and political obligation to ensure the safety of the Israeli population” while calling for the respect of international and humanitarian law (Volt, 2023), a discourse that closely resembles the position taken by European Commission president von der Leyen (Oleart et al., 2026).

Therefore, while Volt’s trajectory is a success in comparison to DiEM25, it also highlights the difficulties of what can be achieved within the existing rules and norms of the EU multilevel field. In other words, beyond its strong discourse on transnational representation, Volt runs into limits imposed by playing the European game: its core policy positions are clearly EU-driven, while its organisation is struggling with national divergences, and combining supranational solutions with an anchoring in national politics. Therefore, Volt offers limited “best practices” in the struggle to democratise European political representation from below and provide it with a coherent party structure beyond the national vs. supranational dichotomy. While more work on transnational partisanship in both theory and practice is necessary, further attempts to create EU political parties that are unable to both maintain coherence and anchor themselves in national debates and grassroots communities are unlikely to succeed.

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Data Availability

Data supporting this study is mostly openly available in the related references. The transcript of the quoted interviews cannot be made available due to privacy reasons.

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