

Transcript of the Press Conference of the Spinelli Group, 21 January 2025

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Lukas Mandl, EPP, Chair of the Spinelli Group

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your interest in this press conference. I speak on behalf of the Spinelli Group in the European Parliament, a decades-old group that serves for federalism in the parliamentary endeavor in this very house, and I'm happy to lead the Spinelli Group in this parliament due to a rotation principle until mid of this year. That's why I start today's press conference, and I will also moderate it, and also the whole issue we are talking about today would be a starting point, a very important starting point for the future of Europe, for the future of the Europeans, and for the future of Europe's contribution to the world.

I'm happy that with me during this press conference will speak Gabriel Bischoff, a member of the European Parliament from the Social Democratic Group from Germany, as well as next to her Daniel Freund, also from Germany, a member of the European Parliament from the Green Group, and Sandro Gozi, a member of the European Parliament for France and from the Renew Group. And Sandro Gozi was the one heading the Spinelli Group before me, and later another colleague is supposed to join us too, he still negotiates and speaks in the plenary of the European Parliament. Ladies and gentlemen, many Europeans, our fellow citizens of the European Union, are concerned regarding the future of this very European Union and of the European continent.

What they demand is a reform of the European Union. So how would a reform of the European Union work? It works through an EU treaty.

We face at this very moment the longest period of time in the history of the European Union without any treaty reform. Since the Treaty of Lisbon there was no treaty reform at all, but this is how an EU reform works, via treaty changes, via a treaty reform. This is why if we want to respond to the call of citizens for the reform of the EU, if we want to contribute to a prosper and proper future of the European Union and of our very continent, we have to thrive for a treaty reform.

How can that work? Very clearly it will not work via polarization, but one against the other, not of political parties, ideologies, entities or even member states, but it will work via building bridges, via seeking for a common perspective on this future, and of course not against the capitals of the member states and the governments there, but as much as it can be with them together. Involvement and building bridges is the way to create a treaty reform and to lead a way to this treaty reform.

We as parliamentarians, I think I can speak on behalf of all of us, understand leading leadership as service. It means to serve. That means we commit ourselves with the paper we will present you with today, we commit ourselves to the Project 27, as we call it, Project 27, meaning 27 member states, will or could undertake a treaty reform by 2027.

This objective is very ambitious, but without ambition it will be impossible to start anything. That means this is really a starting point today, as I have said before. And commitment from our side means we are not in the first place demanding something from others, we do in the first place commit ourselves to these very goals I have just mentioned.

And this means that we scratch out our hand, we want to build bridges, we want to convince others, meaning also political groups which are not represented here today, especially from the broad centre in this very European Parliament, which also includes the conservatives within this European Parliament, and we will reach out our hand also to member states' governments, because only together we can and we will respond and fulfil what citizens demand, namely a treaty reform and a euro reform, which I would call in my language now, with more freedom to the inside and more strength to the outside. And in this spirit, the Spinelli Group Board, which is represented with the members holding this press conference today, has negotiated and drafted the Project 27 commitment, which will be presented today with seven important bullet points which we think will be essential to really have a new EU treaty, to really have an EU reform which really deserves this title. I'm sure that my colleagues will go deeper into the content.

I will moderate and I will say some conclusion remarks in the end. I want to in particular thank Daniel Freund, who was the engine, I would say. I don't know whether a combustion engine or electric engine, but you were the engine of this very Project 27 and of drafting this paper.

We don't agree on everything, but we agree, I guess, on the approach that it's better to agree than to disagree when it comes to EU reform. This is what we are together thriving for, and this is why, without having agreed on it before, I want to first give the floor to Daniel Freund and then to the other colleagues in order to address their points regarding our Project 27. Thank you again for your interest.

Thanks for joining. I look forward to a good conversation. Daniel Freund.

Daniel Freund, Greens/EFA, Board member of the Spinelli Group

Thanks, Lukas. I'm very happy that we can be here with this cross-party group today with our demand for EU reform. We have seen with the crisis, the different crises that have hit the European Union in the last 10-15 years, from financial and economic crisis over pandemic to now war that has come back to this continent, that the world around us is changing.

And I think what we have seen happening in the United States now tells us very clearly we live in a different world. We have, on the one hand, lost cheap energy supplies that for decades has come from Russia to Europe. The security guarantees by the United States are put into question by some.

And we have, I would say generally when you look to China as well, a more hostile world out there. And I think our response here is that Europe needs to be strong, Europe needs to be united and it needs to be able to reform itself to adapt to this changing world. So the proposals that we have made in this Project 27 to reduce the unanimity voting, to invest strategically, to work more closely together on finding European solutions to European problems, but also to enforce our European democracy and our rule of law.

The European Parliament has already made proposals for treaty change. We're open to discuss with the member states' governments, with national parliaments and with everyone else that wants to get involved in this process now. As Lukas said, the aim would be by 2027 for, I would say, at least 27 member states to have this reform to you, which is obviously an ambitious proposal.

But I also think that if you look at the world that is not just going to wait for Europe to get its act together, I fear that if we do not manage as Europeans to reform our joint European political system, then I fear that our decline will proceed. We will become less important in the world, the rest of the world is going to try to divide us and we must stand together. And I think that idea of standing together is what unites us as well and why we're here today.

Thanks.

Gabriel Bischoff, S&D, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

Thank you very much and a warm welcome also from my side. Still a happy new year because I think it's our first plenary here and when you connotate happy and new year together after yesterday, everyone thinks, oh my God, this will be a very challenging year. And I would like to invite you on a small journey to reflect how we would have seen what we heard yesterday, if we would have taken the dynamics of the conference on the future of Europe and if we would, between 2022-2023, if we would have used the opportunity to already change, especially when we look at our foreign and security policy, to be better prepared.

We could react different because I think not only after yesterday, but it is also very clear if Europe cannot act fast, bold and as united as possible, it will come in very difficult times. And this is why we think that we don't want to waste too much time on missed opportunities, but to say we need really to take the opportunity. And on one hand, we have the treaty changes that was already proposed by the parliament in November 2023, but also that we highlighted where are the areas where we really need to get our things together much better and to do it.

And even the council was delaying debates, but also saying, oh, maybe we try out already possibilities that the Lisbon Treaty gives us, but even not that was used in the past. So here we are not well prepared and we now have to use this realization to really get our things together. And this is why the project 27 is important to say, OK, we now really have to do it.

And what we will see and hear, I think I'm more critical because I see that the friends of Trump are getting more and more in the European Union. So this will also be a huge challenge for the next month to come, but at least to come with solutions here so that we can really act bold, act fast and act together as much with as much as possible. Thanks.

Sandro Gozi, Renew Europe, Board member of the Spinelli Group

Thank you very much to you all. I would like to first of all stress the political meaning that here there are representative of five groups which might disagree on several issues, but they are united in pushing for the European Union reform. And we are united because after yesterday, last night is clear, but we knew it before.

We have entered into an era of balance of power. The era, the multilateral gold era is over. Only power counts.

And the European Union is not powerful enough, is not efficient enough and is not democratic enough to be a major actor in this new war disorder, which our best ally, historical best ally, United States of America has clearly indicated as the playground, the new playground for at least the four years to come. The third element that Lucas Mandel has very rightly underlined, that is the first time in European history that we are talking, we are preparing, we are formally committed to an enlargement without taking bold commitment on treaty reform. The first time, the first time.



If we were so shy, we would never go the Single European Act, which has accompanied Spain and Portugal accession. We never got the Australia Treaty. We never got the Nice Treaty.

We never got the Lisbon Treaty. And this is absolutely worrying, deadly worrying. And the lack of appetite in the Council to move on, on the reform and to take on, to withdraw the political conclusion of the fact that, yes, we want enlargement.

Yes, we want a geopolitical European Union. Yes, we want to welcome in our Union our Ukrainian brother and sister and our friend for the Western Balkans. But already now, the European Union is not fit for the job in this new world disorder, even less it will be fit for the job when we will have 34 or 35 member states.

So, I mean, when from the Council the answer is we got the passphrase, my answer is use it now. You don't have to debate on passphrase. The passphrases are in force.

So use it next week. You want to adopt a new way of sanction against Russia? Use the passphrase.

So it is clear that it's a fake answer and it is clear also that the European, in my experience, which is not short anymore, I never, and as a member of the Council, I never heard the Council having a great appetite for reform. You need to be pushed. So our hope is that as we have built bridges among different political groups, to build bridges with the European Commission, to build bridges with like minded government, because we want to be constructive and we want to push at least on key fundamental reform, which are very well indicated in Project 27.

Thank you, Lukas.

Nikolas Farantouris, The Left, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

Thank you, Chair. The five of us, the board of Spinelli Group, wish to stress and highlight our full commitment for a more unified Europe. Our full commitment for treaty reform.

Our full commitment for a more prosperous and unified Europe. As such, we urge the Council and the Commission to take steps now and fast towards treaty reform, common policies, and at the end of the day, a common foreign policy. The ideas, the aspiration and the vision of Altiero Spinelli, the founding father of this house and of this union, is more acute than ever.

Thank you.

Lukas Mandl, EPP, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

Thank you. I see already one colleague from the media representatives online connected who wants to take the floor, but in the first place, I want to give the floor to media representatives present in the room. Thanks again for your interest.

And the first one will be the gentleman who just raised the hand.

Vincenzo Genovese, Euronews

Good afternoon. Thank you very much. Vincenzo Genovese from Euronews.

And my question is indeed exactly to you, President Mandel. Are you sure that your political group is on your same page? Because we see that the EPP is teaming up with nationalist forces in several EU countries, last but not the least, your own country.

Forces that go indeed in the opposite direction. So no more integration within the EU, but more power to national states and so on. So what's your assessment on the direction that the EPP is taking on this?

Thank you very much.

Lukas Mandl, EPP, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

Thank you very much. European People's Party, Christian Democrats are in the main part of founding fathers and mothers, of course, of this very European Union. And also defending and holding up over decades the principle of subsidiarity.

The principle of subsidiarity includes that things have to be dealt with on the level that's the proper level for it. That means there are many issues such as security, such as economy, which have to be dealt with on European level. This is why a stronger Europe, as I always claim to the outside, will be important and will be an important outcome of such a treaty reform.

And a Europe with more freedom to the inside will be important for education, for the workforce, for entrepreneurship, for our social welfare systems, of course, by that way, and for what's one of the claims of the new European Commission for our competitiveness. So also here, an EU reform, and this is what people call it, and this is what I call it as a people's representative, an EU reform, technically speaking, a treaty reform, will have to cover these principles in order to support a Europe with more strength to the outside and more freedom to the inside. And now a very important point comes.

We all have addressed it in different manners. Sandro Gozi has just said it. We have to build bridges.

We already showed that it's possible to build bridges among the today represented political groups here. In order to draft a paper with our own commitment, as I said, in the first place, we don't demand something from others. In the first place, we commit ourselves to what we will do and we will contribute to namely an EU reform, a EU treaty reform, in the best case by 2027.

And that means that we have to build bridges. As well with other political groups, which might be not yet represented in the Spinelli Group Board, namely also not represented in this Project 27, but political groups which are contributing very positively to European integration and which will be needed to fulfil a new treaty reform. Secondly, we also have to reach out our hand, as I have just said, to the member states governments, not to some, but to all, not to some of the 27 member states, but to all of the 27 member states.

Then we walk and go forward in the spirit of the founding fathers and mothers of this very European Union of integration, not of polarisation. I want to emphasise that, of integration, not of polarisation. We will, as the Spinelli Group, I guess I can say that on behalf of everybody, we will not contribute to any kind of separation, division, polarisation or disintegration.

We want to contribute to integration and in that sense to the future of the European Union, which has a great history and a good presence. But as President Macron once has said, Europe could also die. And this is something we will not allow to happen.

We want a new treaty reform. And since you regarded to the largest group in the European Parliament, the largest party of Europe, the party with the largest number of prime ministers, the largest number of commissioners, of course, that's not only the central party, it's also the broadest party. So, of course, I speak on behalf of the Spinelli Group board, on behalf of myself as Spinelli Group president for the time being in the rotation principle.

I speak on behalf of myself as a parliamentarian in the European Parliament. And when we talk about bridge building and reaching out the hand, we also talk among our groups, because in all our groups are different opinions and positions appearing. And bridge building begins in the very own family.

And this is, in our cases, the various political groups. And it's the place where we start bridge building, as this press conference today would also be a starting point. Gaby Bischoff will say something, but maybe since this question was directed to me explicitly, maybe we collect other questions and everybody will speak.

Gabriel Bischoff, S&D, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

Just on this one, because I just wanted to add to you, I mean, Daniel, Freund and me, we were part of the group that in the end came up with the proposal of the parliament that got a majority in the parliament. And we already did build bridges to the ECR in this process. They were invited in the beginning.

But unfortunately, in this process, didn't have a real interest and in the end skipped their partition in this group. Only this is why it's the political groups represented here is that bridge building is something we already tried. But unfortunately, here it did not work.

Lukas Mandl, EPP, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

Yes, Daniel Freund wanted to say something. If there is no remark or question within the room, I am happy to give the floor to Katrin Priebe, who would be connected online.

Katrin Priebe

Hello, and thank you very much for taking my question. I actually have a few. A reform requires unanimity among the 27 member states.

And we know that some heads of state and many governments or like a few governments are strictly opposed to such a step. How do you want to make such an impossible step basically possible? And how would you persuade them?

Also, I hear constantly that within the treaties, there's actually a lot of possibilities to change things. But implementation very often is failing. Wouldn't that also be a way how to actually modernize and to change?

And then one last question. Could you maybe elaborate a bit more how that project 27 is supposed to actually help to stand up to Donald Trump in the next years? How, you know, like a bit more precisely.

Thank you very much.

Lukas Mandl, EPP, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

So before I give the floor to everybody already for a conclusion round, since the time is quickly passing by, I will respond myself and everybody will respond. And then I will say my final remarks. Thanks, Katrin Priwill, for the three questions you raised.

Regarding the last question, I can only say our commitment is with regard to the European Union and strengthening Europe to the outside and creating more freedom to the inside. We will not care for other continents in this project 27. This project 27 is about Europe.

Secondly, you referred to possible means and measures already existing and being there in the structures of the European Union. Sandro Gozi already addressed the Passerelle Clause today, which is sometimes a necessary leverage and sometimes only an excuse, as Sandro Cozzi already said himself. So, of course, we have to demand when it's necessary to use the Passerelle Clause, but it can't be the final structure of the European Union that this second chamber, as I would call the Council of our Parliament, has such a leverage and has only, let's say, a circumvention structure for decision taking, namely the Passerelle Clause.

And for the first point, I mean, in Europe's history and also in the positive parts of Europe's history and in the success story of the European Union, there were many moments and periods of time when things seemed to be impossible. I mean, in the very first place, it was peace between France and Germany. In the further procedure, it was reunification, not only of Germany, as it usually called, but actually of Europe in its entirety.

It was reunification of Europe. So there were many steps which were seen to be impossible. And then due to leadership, meaning servant leadership, service for the people, for the future, for the continent, and also via excellent connections between the leaders and via vision, visionary approach and hard work, of course, bridge building, as we said today, it was possible.

And this is why this is a starting point today. This is why we built bridges. And this is also with regard to the before mentioned conservative group in the European Parliament, which is not represented in the board of the Spinelli group, but of course, part of our bridge building process, at least when it comes to me myself, I would say in the round, as we are here on this stage, we can take the floor and Daniel Freund already asked for it.

He has the floor.

Daniel Freund, Greens/EFA, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

Thanks, Lukas, and thanks, Katrin, for the question on how do you do it? I think there's three factors that make it at least easier. I mean, finding unanimity, changing the treaties, it's never something that you do overnight and that's easy.

But I think also the time frame that we have presented here today makes sense because by 2027, we have to agree on the next seven year budget, the multi-annual financial framework. And we know that in the EU, when you have a broader package that includes budgetary issues, but also political reform, it's easier to find compromise and to build a package where many, if not all of the governments find something in there that convinces them to support the overall package in the end. We have seen that last time around that we agreed on the MFF, something that was very much not agreeable to two governments at the time, the rule of law conditionality in the end was agreed on in a broader compromise.

So achieving something like that, we think in this time frame is very much possible. And also going for a convention that includes national governments, that includes the national parliaments, the Commission, the European Parliament, we think is exactly the right forum to have that debate. If

then still among some governments, certain elements of the reform are not agreeable, the treaties also foresee that a group of countries can move forward on enhanced cooperation or in different formats.

And I think that's something to be explored. And finally, on the question, all the possibilities that we have within the treaties, well, I mean, we have just elected a new commission with a work programme that precisely includes those measures of things that are possible within the treaties. But the very focus of this group here on the podium is, you know, ambitious reform, including treaty change.

So so that's what we focused on today.

Gabriell Bischoff, S&D, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

I think it's very clear that we lost time and this is why we are not well prepared for the times we are in at the moment. And what we can also see is that the cost of hesitation and inaction is huge. And that we are going to try really again by pressuring from the side of the European Parliament, the different political groups to get a spirit of that action is now the essential thing.

And to try with 27, I think is still very important. But we can already see that if that is not possible, indeed, as it was mentioned, before through enhanced cooperation or other ways to at least be able to act here and not to just delay things because they will be complicated. But the world and the situation will be more complicated if we don't act.

We are convinced about this. And this is why we have to try the ways to have a reform of the treaties or to use at least and start with the other means to be better prepared and to give the answers that Europe needs to give, because also citizens of Europe.

Sandro Gozi, Renew, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

See thank you to point first. I would like also to welcome Raquel Garcia Hermida van der Valle. She's a colleague from Renew, member also of the Board of the Spinelli Group. Thank you, Raquel to be here with us second.

I would like to conclude addressing the question on the Method and I would say that: to arrive in 2027, we should go back to 1985. So "Project 27" need the "Method of '85".

What do I mean?

In in the 1985 there was the European Council of Milan. And we were preparing the enlargement to Spain and Portugal. The British Prime Minister, took an official flight to Milan being sure that nothing would happen on treaty revision because she was sure that we would have used the unanimity. But so tough for her, the treaty allows to start a discussion to start a revision treaty process by simple majority. At the end of the conclusion, the Andreotti, as a representative of the Italian government, we draw conclusion very fine, "There was the existence of a majority sufficient to kick off the debate on the treaty revision". And do you know who was the most satisfied leader of the outcome of the single European Act? Margaret Thatcher. She was the best defender of the outcome of that Treaty revision, which brought to the single European Act.

This is what we are saying. We cannot wait that the unanimity to start, we have to build bridges with our like-minded to open a process and you will see, that, one that we have opened the process, we



will also arrive at the end. This is why we strongly believe that we have to be fully committed on Project 27 and the world.

I thank you very much our current chair who have endorsed this project.

Thank you, Lucas.

Nikolas Farantouris, The Left, Board Member of the Spinelli Group

The awaking of Europe depends upon us, upon this House, upon the Parliament, the representatives of European peoples. And despite our differences among parties within this House there is a common denominator within this board and within this group: and this is Altiero Spinelli's vision.

And despite the differences and despite the difficulties: Now is the Time. Us happens with other aspects of European integration, for example in the common commercial policy.

We need to move fast and now towards a common foreign policy. I urge the institutions, the Commission and the Council to move forward this goal.

Thank you.