

Speech by Lothar Bisky at the 3rd Congress of the Party of the European Left in Paris on 3.12.2010

Esteemed Guests, dear Comrades and Friends!

Three years ago in Prague, we reached the conclusion that Europe is developing in the wrong direction. Financial market deregulation has affected all aspects of life. Insecure employment and cuts affecting social services are on the increase. Hospitals and public transport are being sold off. The private sector has strengthened its grip on water, energy and SME banking services. More and more decisions are taken without consulting the people. Armament, as opposed to disarmament, returned to the agenda in the Member States. This is what the Party of the European Left wishes to change.

This was not the Europe that we wanted. This is how we justified our resistance to the neo-liberal upheavals in Europe and the Lisbon Reform Treaty in the European Union. Whenever his visions of European policy fail to gain support, Sarkozy now acts as if he were surrounded by 25 naughty pupils. This will not help us make any progress in Europe.

Comrades!

Today we meet for the 3rd EL Congress in Paris. Many of our warnings have come true. But only few of us predicted the extent, to which the US property crisis that started in summer 2007 would affect the world economy. Promises of deregulated markets did not even escape criticism in conservative circles. In their desperation, the governments identified a crisis intervention strategy, which six months earlier they would have “branded” socialism. They nationalised banks and implemented economic stimulus programmes. All of a sudden, they transformed themselves into advocates of nationalisation. But, in doing so, they proved once again that the state can best preserve the capitalist economy without any public control or increased democracy.

Our history has taught us to be distrustful of state socialism. I have equally little trust in modern state capitalism. The welfare of those that pull the strings behind the economy has been declared a pre-condition for the welfare of everyone else. And this is wrong. It is not just this that is wrong; the state and citizens are being asked to pay for the damage wrought by speculators and misguided environmental enthusiasts. No one has so far learnt anything from this new brand of state capitalism. Scarcely was the first peak of the crisis over and people had recovered from their state of shock, when the neo-liberal whitewashers began to harp on again about the free play of market forces and went all soft when it came to privatisation and deregulation.

The G20 roundtable ruled out policy monitoring mechanisms for the financial markets. Instead, they picked up the neo-liberal textbook and immediately hit upon a solution for all outstanding problems - under A for austerity. By means of tough austerity plans, the debts, bank and corporate rescue plans were to be shouldered by employees, pensioners, school pupils and students, as well as the unemployed and the sick.

The banks continue to speculate and the biggest gamblers have found that dealing with the Euro zone states represents a profitable business model. And I say very clearly: All rescue plans are in vain, if the European Union and major industrial nations fail to develop any new criteria for a successful economic, social and societal policy. Not only do the social cuts fail to meet their politically questionable objective – the consolidation of government finances. They will only intensify recessionary trends or encourage deflation. For us, the first task should be to reduce foreign trade surpluses and ensure socially and environmentally sustainable development.

We support the peaceful protestors in Greece. We have said and will keep on saying: We are all Greeks! And we are all Irish. This is why we observe with great respect and solidarity the powerful protests staged in France. This sense of solidarity also extends to those supporting the general strikes in Portugal and Spain. The European Left supports all people that oppose a policy, which prioritises profits instead of people, and in which national budgets are sold off in order to reward the banks.

I call upon all members of the European Left to play an active part in the Day of Action, which the European Trade Union Congress (ETUC) announced for 15 December, on the eve of the EU summit.

Comrades,
since April, the European governments have been struggling to identify a response mechanism in order to tackle the government debt crisis. It is surprising to watch the European institutions standing on each other's toes. The Council is moving in one direction, while the Commission is heading in another. The Parliament is no longer prepared to accept the imposition of legislation and this new lack of consultation. But we now have to deal constantly with a remarkable circumvention of the rules of democracy by the Council of Europe. No solutions have so far been identified.

The governments are refusing to see the debt crisis for what it is - the latest manifestation of the general crisis facing neo-liberal capitalism, which we have witnessed since 2007. This makes governments unable to act and people rapidly lose all confidence in politics.

Over the last few years, politics has actually provided more and more opportunities to influence developments. But the political system now lacks the appropriate tools that it needs to manage the crisis and also the courage to regain control.

Dear comrades,

on the one hand, we cannot claim that the European Left has developed into a meeting place for disappointed people. This is shown by the election results of the last few years. The Left thus faces a double challenge: We are pushing for the social question to become the central political focus. The crisis has shown once again that answers to cuts in social services and democratic deficits can only be provided by means of a fundamentally different policy. This is why, in the Action Platform, which the executive board submits for your approval today, we also described the situation as a crisis facing the democratic institutions. It can only be overcome if the citizens of the European countries are truly allowed to share in the decision-making process for the common good.

As citizens of the European Union, they must be able to exercise the right to negotiate and contribute to the planning process and decisions relating to public affairs. For this reason, the Left is responsible for sharing proposals, which not only demonstrate our radical critique, but also put forward alternatives. Our political ideas will only inspire confidence, if they are also attractive in the eyes of the people. If they stimulate further development, they will appeal to majorities in favour of their implementation. This is also part of what Gramsci called achieving cultural hegemony.

I believe that we still face a mammoth task. Otherwise, our election results would also be different.

With this in mind, we proceeded to draft an "Agenda for a Social Europe". We looked at the documents approved by the European Left - from its founding manifesto to its Prague theses and the 2009 common European election platform.

And we arrived at the following result: The EL is not suffering from a lack of programmatic positions. We have a wealth of sound positions. Moreover, the time has come to submit an action programme based on this sound foundation. Our action programme will include tasks, which we will tackle during the next 2-3 years. These steps will bring us closer to a social Europe. We will enter into this commitment with our sympathisers and supports, when we assess, at our next congress, whether our shared efforts have borne fruit.

Comrades,
the third Party of the European Left Congress brings us back to Paris via Rome, Athens and Prague. Why have we come back to Paris, as some of the people that we have met in recent years, will ask? I remember it well. It was in 2003 that we met by the Seine in the city centre and discussed forming a European party. There were 11 parties at the time, which decided to form a new party. Let us not forget that the European conservative, liberal and social democrat parties are as old as the European Parliament. The Greens and European Left are very young European parties. But the reasons for the recent party formations vary greatly.

When it comes to the Left, it is based on a new understanding of the political party. Our party did not initially emerge from civil protest movements, but from the experiences of the 1989/90 watershed. On the one hand, we want to be more than a voting organisation for the European Parliament. We also wanted to act as a member party and organisation at European level. The party takes action for the benefit of people from social movements, trade unions and peace initiatives. We want to be open to forces, which are pushing for increased democracy and a social Europe, take environmental issues seriously and take consistent steps against any form of oppression or exploitation. We will also fight any form of war.

We stand for a change of policy, which will enable Europe to prepare internationally for the role of peacemaker and pioneer in terms of resolving pressing human issues, such as managing climate change, combating poverty and subsequently fulfilling this role.

Comrades,
today marks the start of the 3rd congress, at which we will be voting in the 3rd executive board of the recently formed Party of the European Left. This would be a good time for me to provide you with an overview and present my thoughts on the future development of the Party of the European Left. It is with a certain sadness that I come to the end of my task, as it was an important task. We are now about to embark on our seventh year as a party.

Since Billy Wilder directed “The Seven Year Itch”, you might think that relationship conflicts were invented by Hollywood. But experience shows – even outside the film industry – that the seventh year witnesses critical moments in many established relationships. In 2004, we formed the party with a call for foundation in the January, followed by the permanent merger of individual member parties in the May. The programme, statutes and declarations issued in 2004 in Rome bear witness to a firm resolution to fight for a different Europe, as a democratic, transparent, open and emancipatory left-wing party by means of common political initiatives. We have come to terms with our history, after some intense discussions. But, by founding the European Party of the Left, we agreed upon a basic consensus: Internal democracy and independence for the parties in the various countries are pre-conditions for the steps to be taken by the European Left as an independent entity in the present and future.

At the same time, the break with the Stalinist system was an essential pre-condition. We have learned to see the divided history of East and West, South and Northern Europe as a shared history. Looking back is an important means of properly understanding the present and future, as well as the weakness of the left-wing parties after 1989. But we cannot stop there. In order to find a common identity and engaging focus areas, we also need to look ahead.

Comrades,
if we define common areas of focus, they have to demonstrate that we want to take responsibility, that we want to fight for majorities for present and future left-wing policy. If left-wing policy currently lacks a substantial European dimension – then it is not left-wing!

Yes, we look critically at the European Community and it is a decisive area for action, which influences both development in Europe and initiatives aimed at current global problems.

We rule out any European security architecture without Russia. Peaceful conflict resolution, the elimination of hunger and poverty and sustainable preservation of resources cannot be achieved without fighting for a change of policy in the EU. If we combine European convergence with the concept of a European social state at the highest level, fighting for a Social Progress Clause and a European decent minimum wage is an important pre-condition for us.

And if I may be permitted, as a comrade from Germany, as I am aware that the minimum wage is not the main question in all countries:

Germany's wage dumping and pension policy have weighed on neighbouring countries for a long time. This policy is nothing other than the flip side of the dangerous export policy. The German policy must be criticised all the more, when seen in a European context.

Our action programme aims to tackle the tasks before us in two steps. We have put forward proposals for a short-term resolution of the crisis and the protection of income and social standards.

Secondly, we would not be left-wing, if we did not combine this with longer term alternatives aimed at combating increasing poverty and managing the energy and climate crisis with proposals aimed at fighting the cutting back of democracy and privatisation.

One thing is clear: We will fail with our political alternatives, if we fail to see them in a European context or if we fail to put forward our own proposals for European policy at EU level. The European Union does not only consist of the Council and Commission. Even if the European Left only represents a small group in the Parliament, we will also find – whether it comes to working hours directives or data protection – allies in other parties or independent MEPs for our political strategies. We also strongly support our citizens, who – by means of the European Citizen's Initiative, for example – are able to get involved in politics in a new way.

Yes, we could clearly see negative developments inside the EU in the middle of the Euro crisis. Crisis mechanisms are pointless if we fail to fight the causes. This protectionist scratching at the surface – particularly by Germany – serves to fritter away our continent's social and democratic resources. National protectionism under the banner of a Europe built on banks and corporations destroys the foundations of worldwide partnership and an international trade policy aimed at equal rights. As long as we fail to recognise that economic growth has to be qualitative growth, the EU will be a global player stumbling in the wrong direction.

Why does Europe not forge ahead with strict regulations for the financial markets? Why do Merkel & Co only bring home further budget straitjackets from G20 meetings? Why do the governments hammer us with their budget consolidations, as if economies could operate like a household budget for a small family?

What is more important – a problem-free future with speculating banks or the future of education?

Do we want a future with private investment hunters or to work hard to preserve energy resources, the future of people in multicultural cities and rural areas?

Let us show, as the European Left, with our policy proposals, that we have a major responsibility in terms of achieving a change of direction in the European Union. Yesterday, I was with the European Parliament party leader in Hungary. I asked him: "Why do you not introduce financial transaction taxes?" I ask this question everywhere as this inactivity is an inhumane policy.

We are responsible for good social standards in Eastern Europe, training and mobility for gender equality, the right to grow old with dignity and for migrants. Many vulnerable workers, the new information proletariat, farmers – many people who are not involved at all in parties or organisations – have clear ideas about their future. All of them develop ideas as to how they could improve their living conditions. We should and must take up this challenge – even in areas, in which trade unions and social organisations are active.

There is one thing that we should avoid - playing into the hands of Europe's enemies by putting forward a radical critique without proposing any solutions. People have a right to have their concerns and hopes taken seriously.

Comrades,
the threat to democracy does not only assume the silent methods of abstaining at elections or disappointed withdrawal. No. Right-wing populists emerge and neo-fascist organisations are formed. A subtle foretaste of this deconstruction of the political world could again be observed the week before last in the European Parliament, when an MEP allowed himself to refer to "one Reich, one Führer" during a debate and was, at least, thrown out of the room. Signs of this nature need to be tackled by means of a decisive political approach. It is urgently necessary that we unmask the demagogues in everyday life and in the parliaments.

Yes, we are responsible for ensuring that people's rights to co-determination are extended in all walks of life. And – and this closes the circle – this democratic co-determination must be extended to public control of the economy and financial markets.

We must ensure that the fair distribution of productivity gains and participation for employees of companies and local authorities in investment decisions become possible in the long term.

We must not allow ourselves to be discouraged by the failure of our demands for referendums on the Lisbon Treaty. We have to be all the more forceful when it comes to bringing the devastating consequences of economic liberalism and armament into the public debate.

If we see this in real terms, if we describe the negative developments of the prevailing European policy in a way that takes account of people's experiences, the need for change will also become conclusive.

We will hardly gain majorities with our policy, if our demands are dimensioned in such a way that their enforceability by the European Left remains pie in the sky. We will not lose sight of the aim of a different, better Europe, which we also state clearly in our agenda and initiatives. But we will not allow it to make us forget the many steps that must be taken, so that the changes can also begin. I have therefore focused today on a policy aimed at increasing democratic consultation prior to involving citizens in decision-making – on social issues, how the economy is managed and how political decisions are justified – which are important points for me.

Let us face facts - we know that there has long been talk of reforming the European legal foundation for introducing direct elections to the European Parliament. A similar proposal is currently being debated in the European Parliament. And, as we know, other European parties are in the process of influencing and adapting to these developments. If we do not wish to allow the further development of parliamentary democracy in Europe only to be implemented by the ruling parties again, then we must intervene immediately and forcefully. This will increase the importance of coherence within the Party of the European Left in the coming years.

Dear Comrades,
in its seventh year, the European Left has to decide whether it sees its relationship problems as an opportunity or simply wants to sweep them under the carpet. It does not necessarily have to be Marilyn Monroe's billowing dress that draws our attention to other ways forward. But it will simply not be possible without a new fresh breeze blowing through the endless political debates of the European Left.

Above all, it is time for us to stop settling for being aware of our respective inclinations and ideas. Our objective is to create a new fighting culture – aimed at success and outcomes. In the future, it will not be about understanding our differences, but finally using them in a productive way. Yes, we do not share the same view of history and political areas of action on every question.

But we have the same political ideals and a similar ethical compass, which allows us to focus on equality and solidarity. And experience has shown us that freedom is not the domain of economic liberals, which might amount to markets, but belongs to all people and we have to fight for rights of freedom, as well as social and collective rights every day.

People are protesting on the streets in Greece and Portugal against the effects of the crisis. The Irish are showing their frustration and disappointment at the failure of the Irish politicians. In France, old and young people are out on the streets protesting against the increased retirement age. In Germany, a nuclear deal made by the German federal government has met with protests. The Germans are even leaving their houses to demonstrate against a railway station, as also happened at Stuttgart 21.

All these people deserve to know that they have a multi-faceted left-wing party with a human face on their side. This diversity will then be one of our strengths, if we use it for shared initiatives. This is also reinforced by the election figures – if votes are shared between several parties, this only leads to each of them receiving fewer votes than before. A European Left that acts together also relies on close cooperation and critical-constructive solidarity with all alternatively-minded entities.

I am thinking particularly of political entities in the Andean countries, Bolivia and Ecuador, Brazil and Paraguay, Cuba und Vietnam.

Dear Comrades, I would like to thank everyone that has supported me so kindly in my work as EL President and, on behalf of others, I would like to single out Grasciella Mascia and Helmut Scholz and also thank them very personally for their commitment.

Dear Comrades,
let us therefore focus on common political demands and develop - together and by means of alliances - the critical mass, of which Fausto Bertinotti has already spoken.

Instead of paling into insignificance, as we become increasingly fragmented, let us work together to move society's coordinates to the left! The signs all look good.