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“The Rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland: Will Europe Draw the Right Conclusions?”

Despite the state of confusion that prevailed in the European Union following the No vote in Ireland, the official position seems to be “let us continue with the ratification process”. This is a strategy with unpredictable results.

According to the first polls, the reasons for the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland are the concerns among the national business community that the text would open the door to EU-wide tax harmonization and would threaten Ireland's low corporate rate (12.5%), the fear that Ireland would gradually become involved in an EU defence policy losing its neutrality as well as the concerns of Irish farmers over the EU's trade policy. The decision of the Irish electorate was affected by the resignation of former Prime Minister Bertie Ahern, a prominent supporter of the yes campaign, over corruption allegations, and by the fact that the Lisbon Treaty is an unreadable text. Finally, the main reason for the discontent of the Irish people is economic recession.

Considering the reasons mentioned above, the Irish electorate has little incentive to vote differently in a second referendum, if the Lisbon Treaty remains intact. Yet the Lisbon Treaty cannot come into effect unless Ireland ratifies the document, which will require it to win a second referendum. The side of the No campaign defended that a rejection of the Lisbon Treaty will lead to a renegotiation of the document. However, there is no appetite anywhere for a renegotiation. The European Union cannot establish a new Convention, as it was proposed by members of the European Parliament, where the parliaments, the government, the social partners as well as other significant citizens associations will participate. The Lisbon text reflects years of long and painful negotiations. The European Union just came out of a long process of constitutionalization and a reflection period. A new Convention will throw the Union again into a worse state of confusion, with leaders voicing contradictory and even strange ideas.

The key question is to find a quick way out the crisis. If the EU fails to do that, the Union is likely to be weakened internationally, notably in its dealings with powers such as Russia and Iran. Indeed, a key aim of the new Treaty was to lend more credibility to the EU as a political heavyweight in the international arena. The Lisbon Treaty foresees the establishment of a permanent EU Council President and an External Action Service as well as a strengthening of the role of the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. As it is pointed out by EurActiv, the rejection of the Lisbon Treaty by the Irish citizens will also have implications for the enlargement process of the EU since the Treaty also sought to address the bloc's capacity to integrate new members. However, it was also claimed that Europe will not suddenly collapse, since it has been governed successfully by the Nice Treaty even since the enlargement to 27 members.

The crucial point now is for the European elites to draw the right conclusions. Otherwise, the situation will become more difficult ahead of European elections in mid-2009. Instead of establishing a new Convention, the European elites should adopt a new way of thinking, differentiated from the past concepts. The European Union should adapt to the challenges of the new era, the era of globalization, of economic recession and of global threats (climate change, terrorism). This new type of thinking should start from the elites. The most significant developments in the European integration process took place thanks to the clear-cut perceptions and to the radical actions of leading personalities.

In order to understand the actual needs of the European Union, it seems to me that the debate should be focused on two issues:

A. On the use of unanimity in the EU decision-making procedure. It is evident that unanimity impedes the effectiveness of the EU, given the actual global challenges. Some analysts stress out that the European Union can work efficiently only if the decisions are taken by qualified majority voting. In addition, to what extent is unanimity a democratic method in the EU decision making? It is argued that it is not fair few European citizens (the Irish people) to have the power to veto the decisions of millions of others. The answer is that unanimity may be oppressive sometimes. However, it would not be democratic to disrespect the attachment of some states to national sovereignty.

B. On the use of enhanced cooperation. It is pointed out that the European common denominator is too low to correspond to the new challenges. Is enhanced cooperation a new way of acting? No-one can deny the right of some states to move forward if they wish to do so. An a la carte Europe is also the option for Ireland, in order to ratify the Lisbon Treaty, if more opt outs is given to the country.

The Irish referendum is, by all means, an unfortunate event. However, things will become worse if the European leaders do not draw the right conclusions.

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