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BODY:

THE Czech Senate has ratified Europe's Lisbon Treaty. Only Czech President Vaclav Klaus, who must sign the document, and the Irish people, who must vote on the agreement, stand between the European Union and political consolidation.

The EU grew out of the wreckage of World War II. Strengthening the organisation has become the premier project of Europe's elite. The benefits of creating a continental market were obvious, while the prospect of joining the EU spurred reform in the new nations formed after the break-up of the Soviet Union.

But the EU's goal of never-ending expansion is running into rising economic nationalism. Moreover, the bloc increasingly micro-manages national life, from mandating use of metric measurements to limiting the salt content of bread.

Yet the Eurocrats dream of competing with the United States for global influence. For that they have proposed creating a stronger continental government. Hence the Lisbon Treaty.

In 2001, the Europeans began negotiating a Constitution of formidable length and incomprehensible verbiage. It created a president and foreign minister, limited national vetoes and reshuffled institutional responsibilities. Whether the treaty is worthwhile is for the Europeans to decide. But which ones?

Signed in 2004, the Constitution had to be approved by popular referendum and was quickly rejected by both Dutch and French voters. European consolidation looked dead. But the Eurocrats changed a couple of commas and reissued the charter in 2007 as the Treaty of Lisbon - which, conveniently, did not require popular approval in most nations. French President Nicolas Sarkozy admitted: 'There will be no treaty at all if we had a referendum in France.'

But in June last year, Ireland held a referendum, as required by its Constitution, and the voters said 'no'. The collective reaction was: How dare they! Much was said of democracy and majority rights by elites attempting to prevent the people from deciding their form of government.

The problem, argued President Klaus, is: 'There is no European demos - and no European nation,' which intensifies

the problem of 'the democratic deficit, the loss of democratic accountability, the decision-making of the unelected'. Mr Klaus recently warned of 'a situation where the citizens of member countries would live their lives with a resigned feeling that the EU project is not their own'.

Mr Mats Persson of the think-tank Open Europe observed: 'Ever since the Irish voted no to the Lisbon Treaty in June, politicians in Ireland and across Europe have tried to find ways to force this unwanted document through - against the clear will of the people.'

After winning some theoretical concessions, Dublin announced plans to hold a re-vote later this year. If the Lisbon Treaty passes, then what? European policies will be further internationalised. European nations' sovereignty will be further eroded. European traditions will be further submerged. European peoples will be less free.

However, even if the Eurocrats win, they are not likely to create a new nation capable of challenging Washington for global influence.

In his valedictory address as European president, Mr Sarkozy said: 'The world needs a strong Europe and that Europe cannot be strong if it is not united.' But the Lisbon Treaty does not unite Europe. In fact, the determined effort to limit popular participation demonstrates that Europe is not united. Would anyone, other than Belgians - and maybe not even them - today die for Brussels?

What the Sarkozys of Europe desire is greater international influence. But Europeans lack the desire and their governments lack the ability to take the necessary politically tough, financially expensive and militarily risky steps.

Few European governments have militaries with meaningful combat capabilities, and even fewer are ready to use their militaries in real war. Former French foreign minister Hubert Vedrine admitted: 'At no point have the Europeans shown an appetite for a truly European defence. They don't want to devote more money to defence.' From such does not spring an influential power.

A surge of continental nationalism might eventually sweep Europe. But attempting to force recalcitrant peoples into a new political order is more likely to build resistance than support for Brussels. Mr Klaus, who says he will not sign the treaty until after the Irish referendum, represents the European people far more than do the EU's official leaders.

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