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What If the Irish Pass Lisbon Treaty?

By Doug Bandow

Ireland is holding a second referendum on the Lisbon Treaty on Friday. If the Irish say yes, the European Union will be stronger. But will anyone notice?

The EU is two organizations. The first is a common market, the term by which the organization once was known. The EU knocks down national trade barriers, allows free capital and labor mobility, and standardizes economic rules. The result has been to promote economic liberty and development.



The EU's second role is to act as a continental political unit. This objective remains less complete and more controversial.

The European balance has shifted significantly toward Brussels in recent years. Nevertheless, the EU's president is a country, not a person, and serves only six months. The most important powers remain with national parliaments. The EU possesses little foreign policy authority.

Five years ago the European leadership drafted a continental constitution. The objective was to turn the EU into something much closer to a nation, extending control by Brussels over more issue areas and reducing national vetoes over EU decisions.

Constitutional revisions typically require referendums, and Dutch and French voters quickly rejected the new scheme. The Eurocratic elite briefly retreated in shock, before making a few minor changes and reissuing the constitution as the Lisbon Treaty, allowing parliamentary ratification by every nation except Ireland.

Last year Irish voters rejected the proposal to give Brussels significant new authority at the expense of the organization's individual 27 members. Earlier this year the German Constitutional Court voted to uphold the Lisbon Treaty only if the German parliament approved legislation ensuring the latter's continuing role in making decisions on core national issues.

Even if Ireland says yes this time, treaty advocates fear that pressure will grow in other nations to legislate similar caveats. London's Open Europe think tank forthrightly declares: "British MPs need to wake up — and demand the same powers." Similar rumblings have been heard in France and the Netherlands.

Judging the merits of a stronger continental government obviously is a task for the Europeans. French President Nicolas Sarkozy argued simply: "Europe cannot be a dwarf in terms of defense and a giant in economic matters."

But the continent faces few obvious security threats. Whatever Russia's relationship with Georgia and Ukraine, the likelihood of Moscow committing aggression against existing EU members is somewhere between nil and zero.

Moreover, there isn't the slightest evidence that European peoples and governments are willing to devote significantly more resources to the military. European leaders have yet to meet their April promises of an additional 5,000 soldiers for Afghanistan.

Irish Sen. Deirdre de Burca nevertheless claimed: "If I had to name just one compelling reason to support the Lisbon Treaty, however, it is because the treaty will enhance the capacity of the EU to become a more effective actor at an international level."

The accord would create a more unified organization but not more unified views behind it. There is no common foreign policy today nor is there any common foreign policy in the offing. Without that unity, nothing would really change, even with a nominal foreign minister.

Although a consolidated government in Brussels is not necessary to maintain Europe's domestic single market, it could more intensively regulate the continental economy — which would not necessarily be beneficial.

Moreover, the political will for doing more is limited. A recent poll found that 70 percent of Germans, with the largest economy on the continent, oppose bailing out other nations.

What if the treaty nevertheless passes? A government that can be created only by preventing most of its people from voting for it is likely to be more a hollow shell than a solid mass.

Earlier this year Czech President Vaclav Klaus spoke to the European Parliament: "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."

In fact, despite the increasing power of the European Parliament, few Europeans base their votes EP candidates on European issues.

In the recent EP elections voters across the continent instead used the poll to reward or punish various ruling or opposition parties for their domestic actions.

None of the many proposed reforms of the EU get to the organization's essential flaw. Perhaps President Klaus's "European demos" will eventually develop. But attempting to force a consolidated government on an unwilling populace is more likely to undermine popular support for the European project.

Nationalism is strong and even growing in many nations. In contrast, there are only enough European nationalists to fill a few buildings in Brussels. Irish approval of the Lisbon Treaty won't change that.

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