

COMMENT

EuropeanVoice

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Lisbon treaty should be above national politics

The timing of Ireland's second referendum on the Lisbon treaty is now the subject of intense debate in Dublin, in Brussels and in other national capitals. The Irish government has promised its EU partners that it will, subject to certain conditions, hold a second vote – in an attempt to reverse the 'No' vote of last June. Supporters of the treaty want the vote organised this June at the same time as the European Parliament and local government elections, instead of in October, which is when the vote had been expected to take place.

The tempting reason for bringing the vote forward is to take advantage of an apparent turnaround in public sentiment towards the EU. Recent opinion polls have suggested that the Irish would now be ready to endorse the treaty, perhaps because they have been hit by the credit crunch and are braced for recession and rising unemployment.

The prospect of being cast adrift in a mid-Atlantic economic storm has underlined the importance of belonging to the EU and the eurozone – advantages not enjoyed by Iceland.

Since most politicians are opportunists, the desire of some in Ireland to exploit this change of mood is entirely understandable.

It is understandable, too, if politicians in other national capitals share the desire for an earlier vote.

Bringing forward Ireland's second referendum on the Lisbon treaty would help the EU's political and institutional calendar. It would, for instance, help clarify the legal basis under which the new European Parliament would be elected and the next European Commission formed. It would allow the next Commission to take office on time, on 1 November, whereas an October vote might delay the formation of the new team until the end of the year.

But it would be wrong to organise the vote on the Lisbon treaty at the same time as European Parliament and local elections.

Too often, referenda on EU treaties have been entangled in national issues. A vote on an EU treaty is an opportunity for disenchanted citizens to punish local, regional or national authorities for political failures, or to upbraid politicians for their personal errors.

National politics had a significant impact on Ireland's first vote on the Lisbon treaty last June. The result reflected the government's internal turmoil and its plummeting popularity. Bertie Ahern, the former prime minister, tainted by corruption accusations, had resigned only a few weeks before the vote. The 'Yes' campaign barely had time to recover.

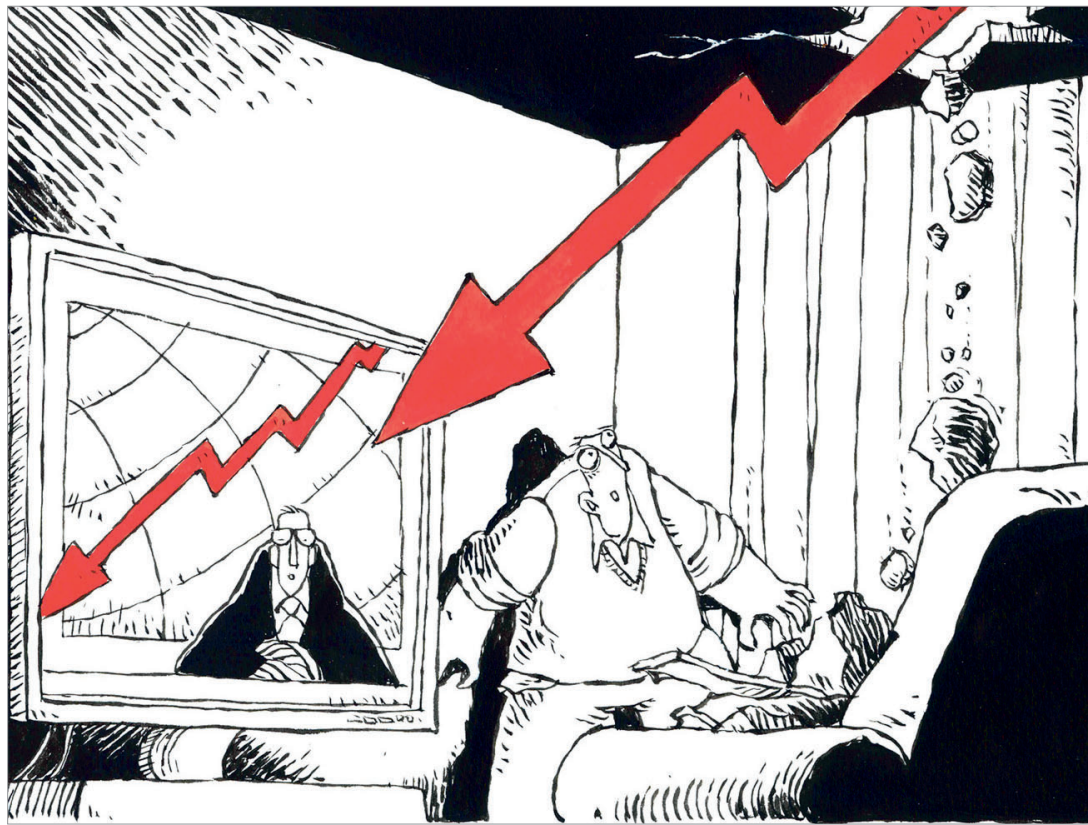
National politics has also ensured that the Czech parliament has so far been unable to ratify the Lisbon treaty.

The ill-judged decision by the government's largest party to link support for the treaty to another divisive issue – whether to host US radar stations on Czech soil – has on several occasions caused the postponement of votes in parliament on the treaty.

So the Czech Republic, which holds the rotating presidency of the EU and must, in this capacity, work for the common European good, bears the dubious distinction of being the only member state whose parliament has not yet ratified the treaty, even though a majority of its population backs it, according to opinion polls. Yesterday (18 February), the lower house approved the treaty, albeit reluctantly. The Senate is scheduled to hold its vote in April.

What the Czech Republic and Ireland have in common is that in both countries ratification of the Lisbon treaty has been held hostage by national politics. Both governments must do more to keep the treaty free from domestic political squabbles or unrelated issues of foreign affairs.

The Irish government, for its part, has to do more than simply rely on the recession to push voters to embrace the EU and its texts. This time round, it must persuade the voters of the benefits of the treaty. Opportunism will not be enough.



CARTOON BY MICHAEL KOUNTOURIS, GREECE © MICHAEL KOUNTOURIS/CAGLE CARTOONS

TEN YEARS AGO Brussels, 18 February 1999

Uneasy truce over euro delegation at G7

Euroland will be allowed to bump up its negotiating team at meetings of the world's top economic policymakers, but only in accordance with strictly defined rules.

Senior monetary officials say the German government, which currently holds the presidency of the EU, has reached a tentative deal with the US, Canada and Japan over who should represent the eurozone at gatherings of the Group of Seven industrialised nations' finance chiefs.

Sources say the US has reluctantly agreed to accept the presence of the chairman of the Euro-11 ministerial coordinating group when issues relating to the "eurozone as a zone" are discussed. But Washington was reportedly

still "very unhappy" about letting a European Commission representative sit at the negotiating table, even in an advisory capacity.

At the moment, Germany, Italy and France each send a finance minister and a central bank governor and they are joined by European Central Bank President Wim Duisenberg for euro-related discussions.

Under an agreement reached by EU leaders in December [1998], Duisenberg would be joined by the chairman of the Euro-11 and a Commission representative to provide "assistance".

US Treasury Under-Secretary Lawrence Summers last month attacked this arrangement, claiming it was "unacceptable", and was supported by Japanese and Canadian officials.

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Open to Islamists?

The EU's approach in the Middle East and North Africa has been based on the primacy of stability, implemented through unwavering co-operation with authoritarian rulers. But this approach is changing slowly, writes **Kristina Kausch**. Behind closed doors, diplomats are pushing for engagement with moderate Islamists, in part for fear of re-radicalisation. Engagement is a fraught process: there is uncertainty about the Islamists' intentions, a fear of bestowing legitimacy on groups who hardly deserve it and many practical and political challenges. But there is evidence that genuinely moderate Islamists have become more open towards the idea of engaging with the West.

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An opportunity for a new Bosnia

A new high representative for Bosnia will soon be chosen, Bosnian political parties are calling for a new constitutional arrangement and there is a new US administration: this is both a moment of change and a moment of opportunity that Bosnia and the EU should seize, write **Christophe Solioz** and **Wolfgang Petritsch**, the international community's high representative in Bosnia between 1999 and 2002.

Europe should adopt a wholly new approach by taking partnership and shared responsibility seriously.

There is no other country in the region whose existence depends so much on the

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continued integration of Europe. But the unification of Europe is not a one-way street. Europe needs to grow within Bosnia as well.

We have been waiting, with rising exasperation, for Bosnia's local authorities to stop their irresponsible infighting, leave maximalist positions behind and meet the conditions that would allow the closure of the Office of the High Representative – and thus end Bosnia's dependency and international custodianship.

Against a backdrop of mounting global challenges, the urgency of renewed and serious

efforts to arrive quickly at a common agenda and to create a new partnership between Europe and Bosnia is all the clearer.

If taken seriously in both Brussels and Sarajevo, a joint search for a decidedly more successful state-building process would finally put Bosnia on the road to local ownership and political responsibility.

That would in turn enhance the responsibility and accountability of the international community – especially of the EU.

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