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The Treaty of Lisbon – Reasons for the Irish No Vote

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Introduction to the system of the EU

1. Semester

“The Treaty of Lisbon – Reasons for the Irish no vote”

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1 Introduction

It was June 13 in Brussels: on the computer screens live ticker were opened instead of files and directives. No one was interested in the news of the ongoing European Football Championship 2008 that people in Brussels normally were enthusiastic about during this month. This special day, everybody was focused on a map of Ireland showing the Irish counties which were step-by-step either coloured red or green. The staff and bureaucrats keenly commented on every change on the map. What was happening there?

The day before, on June 12, 2.8 million Irish voters got the chance to move the European Union one step further by voting in favour of the Treaty of Lisbon. Ireland was the only European country that allowed its citizens to express their opinion on the Treaty by means of a referendum.¹ Suspense was created by the fact that a non-ratification of only one country was enough to stop the whole treaty. Just a little more than half of the Irish people went to the polls so that eventually 860,000 no votes were enough to obtain a majority. Less than a million people were able stop a treaty which was supposed to make the EU and its institutions, regulations and law finally suitable for 27 member states and 492 million Europeans in a constantly changing world, facing new problems like terrorism and climate change. All member states of the EU had agreed on the Treaty of Lisbon and ratified it² as they thought the EU urgently needed a modernisation of the European Institutions. The Treaty of Nice, which forms the present basis of the European Union and goes back to the fifties, and the Treaties of Rome cannot meet this challenge anymore.

Ireland is regarded as one of the “winners” of the European Union. For years, it experienced sustained economic growth, full employment³ and a rising GDP⁴. Then what could be the reason the majority of the Irish people voted against the Treaty of Lisbon or did not even go to the polls, instead of voting in favour of a treaty that would have improved the strength of the EU to which Ireland owes so much?

More and more, the European Union struggles with the increasing problem that it has to defend its acceptance to European citizens. People turn away from the Community because they have got the feeling that they are ill-informed and their interests are less represented on the European then on the national level. There are huge divergences in the ideas about the EU,

¹ Both, the accession to the EC and amendments of the Treaties, demand an amendment of the Irish constitution (Irish constitution , Art. 29, section 4, number 3-11) which requires a referendum (Irish constitution, Art. 46, section 2).
² There is a still ongoing process of ratification in the Czech Republic and Sweden.
³ For many years Ireland had an unemployment rate close to 4 percent which is regarded as full employment.
⁴ GDP: Gross Domestic Product