A "no" vote in Ireland would be disastrous for Europe

According to a Bertelsmann Stiftung study, few options remain if the referendum in Ireland is defeated. The European Ratification Monitor provides an overview on the referenda.

It would be an utter "disaster for Europe" if the people of Ireland were to vote "no" in the upcoming referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon regarding the EU constitution. This is the conclusion Germany’s Bertelsmann Stiftung has reached in a special study on the situation in Ireland three weeks before the referendum. To avoid casting doubt on the likelihood of a positive result, European policymakers have so far refrained from any mention of alternatives if the majority should reject the treaty. However, any conceivable political alternative would represent a serious setback for the European constitutional treaty and the future of the EU, according to the Bertelsmann Stiftung.

For a long time it appeared that this referendum would be a mere formality in the pro-European country of Ireland. As the time for voting has drawn nearer, however, a clear "yes" from Ireland has become increasingly uncertain. While recent surveys still show a slight majority for the treaty's supporters, one in three eligible voters remains undecided. Two-thirds of the Irish population report that they know too little about the treaty, and only one in ten feels well informed. The Bertelsmann Stiftung sees in this situation a disturbing parallel to the Irish referendum of 2001, when a majority of the population, which is for the most part favorably disposed toward Europe, unexpectedly rejected the Treaty of Nizza. On June 12 Ireland will be the only country in the EU to hold a referendum on the Treaty of Lisbon.

The Bertelsmann Stiftung study analyzed not only the current mood of the Irish population, but also long-term attitudes, voting patterns in earlier referenda, the country's material and political interests in the EU, and supporters and opponents of the draft treaty along with their respective positions. Particularly sensitive political issues, which have been exacerbated by the constitutional
debate, include the question of Ireland's policy of neutrality and the provisions on foreign and security policy contained in the EU constitutional treaty. The authors play out the various bleak scenarios that might result for Ireland and the EU if the reform treaty is rejected. The possibilities include holding another referendum after allowing some time to elapse, reopening the carefully balanced treaty package, or undertaking minimal reforms as a last-ditch solution. There is also discussion of granting exceptions from European law, which might have a crucial effect on further discussions if the treaty is rejected. However, the authors point out that precisely in this area European policymakers have little room for maneuver. Ireland's leaders have already succeeded in winning extensive exceptions for Ireland, so there is little room for negotiation on additional demands. As Dr. Dominik Hierlemann, project manager at the Bertelsmann Stiftung, points out, "None of these options is very appealing. This is why the European Union and the Irish government are betting everything on one outcome. A "no" vote in the Irish referendum would therefore be an utter disaster for Europe."

As a supplement to this study, which appeared as part of the series "Spotlight Europe," a web-based tool is now available for examining the current status of ratification of the Treaty of Lisbon in the various member states (see right column). A click suffices to focus the application on countries of particular interest. Users can update their knowledge as necessary and find answers to specific questions.

The complete newsletter "Spotlight Europe" can be downloaded by clicking on the column to the right of this text.

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