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Speech

by the President of the European Parliament

Hans-Gert Pöttering

at the

meeting of the European Council

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President of the European Council, Janez Janša,
Heads of State and Government,
President of the European Commission, José Manuel Durão Barroso,
High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy, Javier Solana,
Ministers,

I. The 'No' vote in the Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty

The outcome of the Irish referendum was a great disappointment to all those who want to make the European Union's decision-making procedures more democratic, more readily understandable to the public, more effective, more straightforward and more transparent.

The Lisbon Treaty strengthens the body which is the democratic representative of European citizens, the European Parliament, conferring on it a right of codecision in almost all policy areas; it gives the national parliaments more responsibility when it comes to the framing of European policies; and it gives ordinary people a greater say in the political life of the European Union, introducing the citizens' initiative by means of which the European institutions can be urged to take action.

And for precisely that reason, the biggest losers as a result of the 'No' vote are not so much the institutions of the European Union, nor governments. The biggest losers are the people of the European Union, who place their hopes in a stronger Union which can, through joint action, overcome the growing challenges linked to globalisation and guarantee everyone in Europe a better future.

It is vital that the reforms contained in the Lisbon Treaty should be implemented so that the European Union can defend its values and interests effectively in the 21st century.

Continue the ratification process as originally planned

In the Berlin Declaration of 25 March 2007, all 27 Member States and the three institutions endorsed the objective of placing the European Union on a renewed, forward-looking common basis.

On 13 December 2007 the Lisbon Treaty was signed by all 27 European Union States. By signing the Treaty, the Heads of State and Government of all the EU Member States gave an undertaking to complete the ratification process in time for the European Parliament elections in June 2009.

Today, 19 countries, in other words two-thirds of all the EU Member States, whose more than 339 million inhabitants already make up a clear majority of the population of the European Union, have ratified the Reform Treaty through their national Parliaments. In some of the other seven Member States, the ratification process is already well advanced and all the remaining States have declared their willingness to complete ratification before the end of this year.

Just as we must respect the outcome of the referendum in Ireland, which was arrived at by democratic means and in accordance with the Irish Constitution, we must also respect the decisions taken by those 19 Member States which have approved the Lisbon Treaty in accordance with their constitutional rules.

In a statement issued on 14 June 2008, the Irish Taoiseach, Brian Cowen, informed the Irish people that his clear message to their country's European partners would be that Ireland 'has no intention of standing in the way of the progress of the European Union, the greatest force for peace and prosperity in the history of Europe'. On behalf of the European Parliament, I should like to thank Prime Minister Cowen for taking this responsible attitude.

The Lisbon Treaty is a compromise reached in lengthy negotiations, one which was drawn up by European and national parliamentarians and representatives of EU governments and the European Commission, working together in an open and democratic Convention with the participation of the accession countries.

The Lisbon Treaty contains the reforms needed to make the European Union more effective, more democratic and more transparent. These key objectives of the Treaty remain as valid as ever: for that reason, the European Parliament calls on all those States which have not yet ratified the Treaty to follow the United Kingdom's example and continue to complete their ratification procedures so that the Treaty can still enter into force in time for the European Parliament elections in June 2009.

I should like to thank the United Kingdom's House of Lords in particular for the decision it took yesterday. Prime Minister Gordon Brown, please allow me, on behalf of the European Parliament, to congratulate you on the leadership which you personally have shown. You have been true to the commitment you made. I was delighted yesterday evening when my predecessor, Lord Plumb, informed me of the result - an outcome to which the former President of the European Parliament had contributed through his own dedication.

It was the same day on which Simone Veil, the first President of the directly elected European Parliament, received the Charles V Prize in Yuste, Extremadura, Spain. She, a Holocaust victim, had invited me to give the laudatio in her honour. Please allow me to share with you a conviction that I have rarely felt as strongly as I did yesterday: the European Parliament has made a great contribution to reconciliation, understanding and the development of common policies for our continent.

The 'no' campaign in Ireland

The public debate in Ireland and the reasons cited during the campaign for voting 'no' suggest that the problems which prevented ratification perhaps had less to do with the institutional changes introduced by the Lisbon Treaty than specific Irish issues that do not necessarily apply to other countries.

This in turn raises the legitimate question as to whether and to what extent the decision to reject the Lisbon Treaty was actually based on the substance of the Treaty, or whether other circumstances prompted the Irish people to vote the way they did.

In my capacity as President of the European Parliament, in early April this year I made an official visit to Ireland.

During my visit I saw that many of the arguments which were clearly decisive in securing a 'no' vote distorted the facts. For example, it was wrongly claimed that the Lisbon Treaty would make euthanasia legal in Ireland, even though Protocol 35 to the Lisbon Treaty explicitly rules this out and social policy decisions of this nature are and will remain purely national matters.

The issue of abortion was once again central to the debate: however, the Lisbon Treaty quite explicitly leaves untouched the Protocol annexed to the Irish Constitution in connection with the Maastricht Treaty which guarantees that European treaties will have no impact on Irish abortion law.

The Lisbon Treaty will not introduce military service at European level, nor will it have implications for Ireland's policy of military neutrality. The European Union is a force for peace in the world: by establishing the European External Action Service, the European Union is seeking to endow itself with the means to make an effective contribution to establishing peace throughout the world and providing humanitarian aid to those who need it most urgently. Explicit guarantees have already been given concerning Irish neutrality and sovereignty.

The Lisbon Treaty in no way seeks to influence tax policies and is completely silent on the issues of public and private property or family policy, although it would do no harm to point this out once again.

The reduction in the size of the European Commission was already provided for in the Nice Treaty, which Ireland approved by means of a referendum. The Lisbon Treaty merely laid down the practical arrangements for the fair rotation system, under which all States were to be treated equally, which was to come into force in 2014 - at the earliest.

Irrespective of these issues, however, it is worrying to note that many members of the public in Ireland and in some other Member States – although not all – feel disquiet at what they take the

word 'Brussels' to imply. Although this disquiet is unfounded in many cases, we must nevertheless take it seriously at every political level. It demands that we all demonstrate a greater commitment to the European ideal, that we focus on the genuinely important tasks which we can fulfil together and that we find better ways of informing and communicating with the citizen.

In that connection, we are also dependent on the goodwill of the media. Our commitment to the unification of our continent should always be stronger than the resolve displayed by the opponents of our objectives.

The way ahead

Paradoxically, what today is seen as a disastrous setback for the Union as a whole may hold the key to solving the problem in the future. Fears fanned by misinformation can be allayed by objective, valid arguments. Specifically Irish problems can be dealt with by means of specifically Irish solutions.

During the Summit, Prime Minister Cowen will outline his analysis of and possible initial responses to the questions raised by the voters in Ireland.

All the Member States and the European institutions now have a major responsibility to work together with Ireland to find a solution.

The European Parliament is also fully committed to the task of overcoming these challenges. We expect to be involved in all aspects of the process.

I should like to personally thank the President of the European Council, Janez Janša, and the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Durão Barroso, for the excellent way in which they have cooperated with the European Parliament.

We now need understanding and a responsible approach on all sides. We can only succeed together.

In the European Parliament's view, until such time as the reform Treaty comes into force there can be no further accessions to the EU, with the possible exception of Croatia.

For that reason, I should like to draw the attention of all those countries which have signed but not yet ratified the Lisbon Treaty to their responsibility for that area of EU policy as well.

We must continue the ratification process as originally planned and, at the October meeting of the European Council at the latest, we should lay down a procedure which makes it possible for the Lisbon Treaty to enter into force prior to the European Parliament elections in June 2009.

II. Policies: The European Union continues to work for ordinary people

Climate change and energy supply

The problems affecting the ratification process must not prevent us from moving forward with the practical work of implementing EU policies.

The specific legislative measures proposed in the energy package put forward by the European Commission in January 2008 have cleared the ground for a transition to a low-CO₂ economy.

The European Parliament has already made good progress with its consideration of these legislative proposals and, with the support of the political group chairmen, has considerably speeded up its work.

We attach the same crucial importance to this package of measures as we did to REACH and the Services Directive.

Rather than in spring 2009, as originally planned, in all likelihood we will complete our work on the package as a whole in December this year, through our consideration of the directives on emissions trading and carbon capture and storage and of the decision on burden-sharing.

Parliament's standpoints on the directives on renewable energy and CO₂ emissions from cars could already be adopted in plenary during the autumn.

The European Parliament is hoping to reach agreement with the Council quickly on these directives so that the European Union can already point to tangible results when the climate protection conference is held in Poznan on 10 December 2008 and when the following conference takes place in Copenhagen in December 2009.

The increase in oil and food prices

The dramatic increase in oil prices on world markets is a concern for both the public and for the European economy.

The European Union and its Member States must do everything they can to lower demand: we must reduce our dependence on fossil fuels and achieve improved energy efficiency.

Food prices have also increased markedly in recent years, a trend which has had a major impact on the food security of poor and very poor households, whether in the European Union or, more particularly, in the developing countries.

In that respect we welcome the Commission's proposals and we should work together, or at least coordinate our efforts, to achieve our aims.

Every day more than 850 million people, 170 million of them children, suffer from hunger or malnutrition. Every year 5.6 million children die from malnutrition. We cannot simply accept this as inevitable: prompt and resolute action is now needed in the countries concerned and at international level.

The European Union and its Member States must honour their funding pledges and agree on specific tasks with a view to ensuring that development funding actually helps us to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 and enables the countries concerned to produce the water and food they need to supply their own populations.

The United Nations conferences on Africa and the Millennium Development Goals to be held this coming autumn will provide a good opportunity to take practical steps which offer real prospects of success.

Justice and home affairs

As long ago as during the preparations for the Amsterdam Treaty, the European Parliament was calling for the establishment of an area of freedom, security and justice and played a constructive role in the development of that area.

In that connection, yesterday's adoption by the European Parliament of the Weber report on common European standards and procedures to govern migration-related issues certainly constitutes a significant step forward.

By adopting the report, the European Parliament has once again demonstrated its responsible approach to its role as co-legislator.

The directive guarantees a transparent return process and links that to procedures designed to ensure that the people involved are treated humanely and with dignity.

We must take all appropriate measures to halt the deaths of countless people in the Mediterranean. This is a political, but also a moral, responsibility.

Further progress in the development of FRONTEX and in the use of modern technologies is essential.

One priority political task remains, however - that of supporting the Mediterranean countries and the countries of sub-Saharan Africa in their development, so that their people have a future where they are. For that reason as well, as regards our dealings with the Mediterranean region we are placing great hopes in the forthcoming French Presidency.

Crisis on the financial markets

Finally, I should like to touch on one more issue which the European Parliament feels should be addressed at European level in coming months: the crisis on the financial markets.

Although the euro – and we look forward very much to Slovakia joining the eurozone in the near future – has shielded us to some extent from the impact of the sometimes disastrous turbulence which has affected international financial markets in recent months, we have seen clear evidence, both in the United States and in the European Union, of the shortcomings in regulatory and supervisory procedures which have made the limits to self-regulation glaringly obvious.

In the United States, recognition of this fact has led quickly to the revamping of supervisory and liability arrangements. In the European Union, although a political discussion has started concerning ways of reducing financial risks, it has not yet led to any comprehensive reform of supervisory systems, let alone proposals to improve the protection offered to millions of private investors.

The European Parliament would welcome suitable proposals from the European Commission.

Thank you for your attention.