

Ireland puts kibosh on bid to centralize EU power

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PARIS - The European Union, Canada's second-largest global trading partner, was plunged into a "political crisis" yesterday when referendum results showed the Irish had voted down a treaty intended to give the EU a stronger global voice.

Ireland, one of the smallest of the bloc's 27 member countries, was the only one that put the accord, which requires unanimous support, to a referendum.

No country has benefited from Europe's greater integration than Ireland, but voters were convinced by Euro-skeptics that the treaty could hurt Ireland's independence and impose Europe's values in areas such as abortion laws.

It was the third time in this decade that a complex attempt to streamline the unwieldy EU has been scuppered by voters in national referendums.

"This is a political crisis for Europe," said Antonio Missiroli, an analyst with the Brussels-based European Policy Centre. "If you can't get your act together, how can you be seen as a credible international actor."

But Mr. Missiroli said he doesn't think the situation will affect Canada-U.S. trade or the current attempt by Canada to strike a "Transatlantic Accord" to expand trade and investment.

Jason Langrish, spokesman for the Canada-Europe Roundtable for Business, a Toronto-based lobby group, agreed.

"The constitution is an internal EU issue, and the Irish rejection of the treaty is an example of a reluctance on the part of certain EU member states to transfer ever more of their sovereignty to Brussels," he said in an e-mail yesterday. "Further to this, the Irish in particular have shown themselves to be great proponents of trade and investment with North America.

"If anything, a deal with Canada would be welcomed in a number of European circles as offsetting the perceived drift eastwards of the European Union through its member state expansion agenda."

The Lisbon Treaty, created after a more ambitious constitution was voted down in 2005 by French and Dutch citizens, would have streamlined the EU's cumbersome decision-making process.

More important, it would create one president and one foreign policy czar, replacing more than a half-dozen top officials who currently speak for the EU overseas. That change was advanced in part to answer former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger's famous question: "Who do I call if I want to call Europe?"

Irish Prime Minister Brian Cowen said that while the will of the Irish populace had to be accepted, "a period of reflection" was needed.