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EUROPEAN COMMISSION FOR DEMOCRACY THROUGH LAW
(VENICE COMMISSION)

in co-operation with
the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs
and
the “Executive Campus HSG of St Gallen University”

in the framework of the Swiss Chair
of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe

CONFERENCE

on “Democracy and decentralisation -
Strengthening democratic institutions through participation”

St Gallen, Switzerland, 3-4 May 2010

SYNOPSIS

The Venice Commission organised, under the auspices of the Swiss Chair of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, in co-operation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and the University of St. Gallen, a Conference on "Democracy and decentralisation - Strengthening democratic institutions through participation".

This event, which took place on 3-4 May 2010 at the Executive Campus of St Gallen University, brought together nearly 300 participants from the whole of Europe and other countries, including some 50 rapporteurs and speakers. In particular, academics, politicians and constitutional judges attended the Conference.

The Conference was opened by Messrs Roberto Balzaretto, Secretary General, Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs, Thorbjørn Jagland, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Andreas Gross, member of the Presidential Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, Ian Micallef, President a.i. of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe, Jean-Marie Heydt, President of the Conference of INGOs and Gianni Buquicchio, President of the Venice Commission.

Following a keynote speech by Prof. Wolf Lepenies, Berlin, the first plenary session consisted of a Round Table on "Strengthening democracy through decentralisation", moderated by Mr Markus Spillmann, Editor in Chief « Neue Zürcher Zeitung » (Switzerland) and with the participation of Mr Arnold Koller, former Federal Councillor (Switzerland), Ms Irune Aguirrezabal, Director, Directorate for the European Union and the Coordination of Foreign Affairs of the Autonomous Government of the Basque Country (Spain), Messrs Jerzy Stepien, former President and Judge of the Constitutional Court (Poland) and Erwin Teufel, former Minister President of the Land of Baden-Württemberg (Germany).

The second plenary session took the form of four workshops on the following themes:

- Subsidiarity: Legal Principle or Political Slogan?
- Decentralisation in Multi-Ethnic States
- Proper Resources and Autonomy in Budget Management
- Referendum at Regional and Local Level.

The conclusions of these four workshops were presented by members or former Venice Commission members respectively Messrs. Christoph Grabenwarter (Austria), Jean-Claude Scholsem (Belgium), Hans-Heinrich Vogel (Sweden) and Jean-Claude Colliard (France).

During the ensuing debates there was a discussion of the problems and an examination of concrete examples. These debates led to the conclusion that, despite the diversity of state structures and national history, similar issues arise in different parts of the continent as well as to an examination of answers given to these questions.

The general conclusions were presented by Mr Paul Widmer, Permanent representative of Switzerland to the Council of Europe.