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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

**WORKSHOP No. 2**  
**Decentralisation in Multi-Ethnic States**  
**Possible Guidelines for Input and Discussion**



**Workshop 02**  
**Decentralization in Multi-Ethnic States**  
**Possible Guidelines for Input and Discussion**

**1. Topic, key notions, concepts**

Even though a topic such as "decentralization in multi-ethnic states" never ceases to be relevant, it should be subject to questioning and further inquiry.

(a) The concept of "decentralization" may make sense in unitary states; in any case, it presupposes the existence of a center. Switzerland's political structure, on the other hand, has been characterized by a marked lack of centralization for a long time; in the European context (or in comparison with larger states), Switzerland remains quite non-central in structure.

(b) The concept of multi-ethnicity may well be too narrow and circumscribed since groups interested in decentralization are motivated not only by ethnic concerns but also by religious, linguistic, ideological, or more broadly normative ones.

(c) To put it bluntly: do we not nowadays live in multi-ethnic, decentralized states everywhere? Notions such as centralization and decentralization open a wide spectrum of options or combinations. Moreover, every modern society that is encompassed by a state is multi-ethnic. Thus, what we really do when discussing the issue is raising the question of what inherently constitutes a soundly constructed state and what impact strong (or predominant) ethnic groups may have on such a state.

## **2. Who should be doing what – the quest for a golden middle (or model)**

(a) Who should be doing what? What are the arguments set forth by centripetal interests, what are those set forth by local communities? Discussion and critical examination of arguments and ideologies.

(b) The enigma of subsidiarity: what are 'objective' criteria for assigning tasks, jurisdictions, and autonomy? Take, for example, a criterion such as economic efficiency and weigh it against the 'value' of self-determination: what should prevail? How much bearing does the concrete matter at hand (education, health, infrastructure, immigration etc) have upon the choice of criteria? How strong is the "ethnic" argument (viz the recent decision in the Sejdic case)?

(c) Public choice and the proper functioning of democracy: what decision-making procedures do we ideally need?

(d) Case studies: an endless source of food for thought and discussion

## **3, What margin exists in the political sphere?**

(a) Political volition vs. institutional, ideological, and cultural determinants and path dependencies: under what preconditions is decentralization achievable at all?

(b) What is the specific impact of globalization?