

Summary report for the conference

**DIRECT DEMOCRACY:
The Eastern and Central European Experience
<<http://c2d.unige.ch/col2000>>**

Budapest, Hungary, 24-26 February 2000

1. Overview

The international conference on "Direct Democracy: The Eastern and Central European Experience" has taken place over two days in the main building of the Central European University (CEU), located in the heart of Budapest. The conference has been organised by the Institute for Legal Studies, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, represented through Prof. Vanda Lamm; the Central European University Budapest, represented through Prof. Andras Bragyova and the Research and Documentation Centre on Direct Democracy, University of Geneva, represented through Prof. Andreas Auer and Michael Bützer.

A welcome cocktail on the 24 February in the CEU Conference Centre was followed by two days of intense and rich presentations and discussions. The various points of view and issues who have been raised by speakers and participants clearly confirmed a general and substantial interest in the conference theme. At the same time, the conference primarily responded to a latent need of clarification of academic theories and practical concepts.

2. Sponsors

It was only with the generous and provident support of several Swiss sponsors that the conference could take place. We would particularly like to thank the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs for their determinant contribution.

The six following institutions participated financially in the conference: Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Bern; Centre d'études juridiques européennes (CEJE), University of Geneva; Académie suisse des sciences humaines et sociales (ASSH), Bern; Faculty of Law, University of Geneva; Swiss National Science Foundation (FNSNF), Bern; Fonds général, University of Geneva.

Moreover, a special thank goes to the Swiss Embassy in Budapest, in particular to Ambassador Rudolf Weiersmüller and Counsel Bernhard Gasser, for officially receiving conference speakers and organisers on Friday evening in the embassy buildings.

3. Participants

All in all, around 120 academic researchers, politicians, judges, militants and interested persons took part in the conference sessions. More precisely, five broad categories of participants can be discerned: Conference speakers and session chairmen; Reporters of country abstracts; Invited personalities from all over Eastern and Central Europe; Applicants from several Western and Eastern European countries; Organisers from Budapest and Geneva.

4. Live Broadcasting on the internet

Conference presentations and debates were transmitted, in collaboration with the C3 Foundation, Budapest, live on the internet and could thus be watched from all over the world. A first analysis of the audience during the two days showed quite positive results.

Video copies of this broadcast will soon be available on the conference homepage, which will allow a review of each presentation at any time.

5. Short review of the academic program

The core interest of the conference, namely the academic contributions, will soon be published as collected papers, which is why we now just briefly discuss the general program structure. Three main sections have been distinguished:

First, a theoretical introduction placed the topic in its broader context and pointed out specific Eastern and Central European phenomena. Thus, although pretty recent, all post-communist states seem to have achieved the new legitimization devices - referendum and initiative - autonomously, completing and not replacing the representative forms of their political systems.

The second section focused more in detail on the legal institutions on the one hand, and on the practical experiences with them on the other. Strikingly, even if there exists a wide variety of institutional types and procedures, subject-matters of popular votes tend not to concern legal norms but general questions only. As a consequence, the people's sovereignty lies often not in their own but in the hands of the parliament or the president, as well the constitutional court. It is therefore not astonishing, given the predominantly binding character of referenda, that threshold requirements are rather high in Eastern countries. Nevertheless, with more than 70 national referenda in over 19 countries since 1989, direct democratic institutions seem to have generally become established as a convenient and efficient mean to legitimise state actions or non-actions.

Third, a short overview on the sub-national level illustrated an active use and a perhaps more easily practicable way to direct democracy.

6. Concluding Remarks

The experience with direct democratic institutions in Eastern Europe is fascinating and unique, which was reason and justification to organise this conference. After two very fruitful days, one has to acknowledge that there is no fundamental difference to the "Western" trajectories in this respect. There are as many variances of institutions and experiences with direct democracy as exist single countries. Thus, each context deserves a special observation and contributes in itself to a better and general academic understanding of these institutions.

Finally, with the publication of the conference texts, the organisers would like to render accessible the conference findings to a large public. That way, they would like to actively inform and strengthen civil societies in the new Eastern and Central European states, first and foremost condition for a viable democracy.