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**EMPOWERED CITIZENS AS THE HEART OF AUTONOMIES,  
STRONG DEMOCRACIES AND GOOD GOVERNANCE:  
AUTONOMY AS PART OF THE DEMOCRATISATION  
PROCESS<sup>1</sup>**

I am very grateful for the great appreciation you offer to the report on the potentials of the concept of autonomy for peace making and the overcoming of conflicts by peaceful means I had the privilege to elaborate ten years ago for the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.<sup>2</sup> In my presentation I would like to concentrate myself on one crucial element which has been mentioned in my report but deserves a special underlining: Territorial autonomies will only be possible when they are understood as a constitutional element of a substantive democratization process within a state; they have also to be enshrined in the national constitution and have to be protected by a strong rule of law. This is also a difference to the soviet connotation of the term, where you neither had democracy nor the protection of the individual by an independent juridical system.

Since the French Revolution one central requirement of a democracy is the right, the capacity and the possibility of citizens to act together with others in order to influence the common life conditions. This means that in a democracy, citizens – whenever they are concerned by a decision – they should be indirectly or directly be part of the decision making process.

The consequence: In a democracy citizens have to be seen as subjects and not objects of politics. The state has to be organised in a way that citizens can live as subjects. They should be able to be free, because freedom should be understood as the ability to be active and cannot be consumed. This means that the decisions should be taken as close to the concerned citizens as possible in order to allow them to realise their highest influence.

Strong democracies provide societies and free citizens with the institutions and the proceedings to resolve the conflicts which are natural children of freedom without any violence.

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<sup>1</sup> Written version of the keynote lecture delivered by Andreas Gross

<sup>2</sup> Strasbourg, PACE, Doc.9824, June 3<sup>rd</sup> 2003

Concerning the politics of such strong democracies, three elements are essential: First, political power has to be organised in a decentralised way. Issues which concern only a part of the national community should be taken within this part. The policies which matter in this context are: organisation of school and children institutions, cultural affairs and local traffic. Second, on communal and regional level policies have to be constituted in a way that allows the citizens to decide on the topics which are concentrated in municipalities and regions. They also need to elect executive and legislative bodies elected in open electoral systems which allow citizens to cumulate candidates on a list and also between lists. This ability destroys the illegitimate power of party-bosses to allow only those people to be elected who agree with the boss. The third element of such an open and freedom-increasing polity are citizen referenda and popular initiatives by which a small minority can propose to all citizens any time any constitutional or legislative reform. Such an opportunity prevents the impression that politics are closed shops and that some few people in the most important institutions and parties have the monopoly of politics.

The specific challenge of any reform of the polity of democracy today is based on the fact that today's democracies are in most of our countries more or less in double crises: they are much too national, although the nation state in a global economy has only limited powers and they are too small for the big issues. But today's democracies are also much too centralistic.

One reform we need is the transnationalisation of democracy, its constitution on the European, continental and transnational level. This will be possible when citizens regain their trust in democracy after it has been decentralised at home. The constitution of autonomous regions is one element of this decentralisation process and of a decentralised polity.

Freedom, involvement and the participation of citizens are very important because only by offering such opportunities can political systems and polities allow citizens to identify themselves with politics; citizens are enabled to learn, they might be better integrated and manipulations and violent setbacks can be prevented. Such polities reduce the distance between citizens and politics, the state and what is often felt as "political class" with a negative connotation.

The modern concepts of territorial decentralisation and citizen's participation have a common soul, an element of every strong democracy: the sharing of power. In a democracy, which allows citizens much participation, the power is shared in a vertical way between the government, the parliament and the citizens. Decentralisation means to share the power in a horizontal way with the regions and the municipalities.

To share the power is a constitutive element of democracy. It makes it more human as well as more controllable by the citizens. Shared powers are also better protected.

Shared powers create a variety of institutions which enable a system of checks and balances.

Whoever argues for a more participatory democracy has to stress that such a more inclusive democracy does not undermine representative democracy. On the contrary: direct democratic elements make the representative democracy more representative. More citizen participations mean more debates, discussions, interactions and common reflections – all ways by which politicians and citizens come closer and the first learn more about what the latter ask for. They will be able to represent them better.

Participatory rights create polities and processes which allow mutual information and learning processes. Citizens start to think more, get better informed and involved and politicians learn to listen more and answer better all questions. More communication is in the interest of all.

Processes of decentralisation and participation are twins which need each other in order to keep the system together. Decentralisation might increase the centrifugal forces which can make the integration of a diverse society more difficult. Participatory elements are helpful because the participation of citizens in the making of the laws and the constitution increases their integration and identification with the polity. It brings as much integration by communicative interaction as the decentralisation risks. Different people prefer to live together when they are invited twice a year to discuss their differences and make common decisions. Participation is the most modern and free way of integration of modern societies where you always see more differences and common attitudes.

The decentralisation of the state might be symmetrical and thus all regions have the same self-governing powers. In this way this process is called traditional German type of federalism. When different powers (“autonomies”) are given to the different regions – because of linguistic, cultural or geographic reasons – than one might use the term asymmetrical arrangements of powers. In both ways you share powers in order to better integrate the country and unite the state by respecting its diversities.

How you do it has to be enshrined in the constitution. And the protection of the constitution also protects the power sharing arrangements and provides the rules you need in order to resolve possible conflicts in a peaceful way.