

The term “sovereignty” has had different meanings through history. Also today, it is used for many purposes in national and international politics. In Europe, international lawyers tend to be critical of that concept. According to the world-renowned international law professor Martti Koskenniemi, their scepticism might be rather shortsighted sometimes. As he states in an essay published in 2011 in the Asian Journal of International Law, sovereignty “articulates the hope of experiencing the thrill of having one’s life in one’s own hands. This is what sovereignty meant for those who struggled against theocratic rule in early modern Europe or invoked it to fight for decolonization in the twentieth century. Today, it stands as an obscure representative of an ideal against disillusionment with global power and expert rule. In the context of war, economic collapse, and environmental destruction, in spite of all the managerial technologies, sovereignty points to the possibility, however limited or idealistic, that whatever comes to pass, one is not just a pawn in other people’s game but, for better or for worse, the master of one’s life.”

In Switzerland, the concept of sovereignty is at the heart of the most emotionally debated political question today: Who has the last word when decisions taken through direct democracy contradict Switzerland’s international obligations? While currently more and more decisions adopted through direct democracy contradict important binding international treaties, like the European Convention on Human Rights or the Agreement on free movement of persons with the EU, this determining question has not been answered yet. There will be time to discuss the concept of sovereignty with Martti Koskenniemi. His thoughts should lead to a nuanced debate – not just a simple discourse on the “good” or “bad” in international law.

# What Use of Sovereignty today?

Current Debates on Democracy  
and International Law

**Workshop with Prof. Dr.  
Martti Koskenniemi**  
**October 19, 2015**

**ETH**

Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich  
Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich



**Universität  
Zürich** UZH

ZENTRUM  
GESCHICHTE DES WISSENS

*foraus*  
Forum Aussenpolitik

# Monday October 19, 2015

## 14:00-17:00

### Welcome & Introduction

**Dr. Fanny de Weck**

**Legal Expert & Head of the Program on International Law and Human Rights of *foraus*–*Forum Aussenpolitik***

Introduction on the Current Legal Situation and Debate in Switzerland on International Law

### Discussion with

**Prof. Dr. Martti Koskenniemi**

**University of Helsinki, Director of the Erik Castrén Institute of International Law and Human Rights**

### Host & chair

**Prof. Dr. Monika Dommann**

**University of Zurich, Historical Institute & Center „History of Knowledge“**

Based on the following texts:

Martti Koskeniemmi: „What Use of Sovereignty Today?“, in: Asian Journal of International Law, Vol. 1, January 2011, pp. 61-70.

Anina Dalbert, Stefan Schlegel & Fanny de Weck: „Volksinitiativen und Völkerrecht. Eine Lösung, um Vertragsbrüche zu vermeiden“, *foraus* publications No. 3, November 2014.

There are only limited places for participants.  
**Registration is required.** You will receive the text files and further reading recommendations after the registration.

### Organisation

ZGW & foraus

### Registration & Contact

zgw@ethz.ch

### Web

www.zgw.ethz.ch

www.zgw.uzh.ch

www.foraus.ch

### Location

Universität Zürich

Rämistr. 64 FSW

Seminar Room E 015

8001 Zürich

Martti Koskenniemi was invited as an academic guest at the ZGW by Prof. Dr. Svenja Goltermann and Prof. Dr. Monika Dommann (both UZH/ZGW).

