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12 States Sign World's First Treaty on Access to Information - What About the Other 35 Council of Europe Member States?

12 European countries - Belgium, Estonia, Finland, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Slovenia, and Sweden - today became the first states to sign the world's first treaty on access to information - the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents – at a meeting of Ministers of Justice held in Tromsø, Norway.

Access Info Europe and ARTICLE 19 today welcomed the leadership shown by these 12 countries, and called the Council of Europe's other 35 Member States to demonstrate their commitment to government transparency by signing and ratifying the Convention.

“Countries like the UK, France, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands were all present during the negotiation of the treaty. Responding to civil society concerns about the treaty, they argued that a minimum-standard Convention would attract more signatures. Why then have they not signed? Where is their commitment to the public's right to know?” said Helen Darbishire, Executive Director of Access Info.

Notes for Editors

- A map of those who signed can be found at www.access-info.org
- The Convention on Access to Official Documents sets a low minimum standard on the right of access to information. A positive feature is that it establishes a right to request “official documents”, which are broadly defined as all information held by public authorities, in any form. The right can be exercised by all persons with no need to demonstrate a particular interest in the information requested, and at no charge for filing requests and viewing documents.
- Signature of the Convention is the first step, and should be followed by ratification. The Convention contains optional provisions such as whether judicial and legislative bodies will be fully subject to the right to request and receive information. It will enter into force once 10 states have ratified.
- Slovenia is one country taking a lead on ratification, having already included ratification of the Convention in its legislative programme. It also plans to ratify the optional provisions on access to legislative and judicial information, setting a high standard for other European States.
- In April 2009, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that access to government-held information is a right protected by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

For more information, please contact:

- Helen Darbishire, Executive Director, Access Info Europe
+ 34 667 685 319 helen@access-info.org
- Toby Mendel, Senior Legal Counsel, ARTICLE 19
+ 44 (0)7964 015083 a19law@hfx.eastlink.ca