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Press statement

Volunteer and honorary activity in jurisdiction is vital for Europe National organisations for lay justices and judges agree to cooperate

Berlin – On Monday, 19 July, a three-day meeting in the European Academy in Berlin concluded with a resolution that cooperation between voluntary and honorary activities in jurisdiction performed by members of the public in Europe is to be strengthened and a purposive Europe-wide organisation is to be set up. Those taking part were representatives of national associations and organisations of lay judges and justices, justices of the peace and arbiters.

Representatives of organisations from England and Wales, Scotland, Spain, Sweden, Finland, Austria and Germany agreed that with this resolution in mind they would continuously exchange information about developments in their national legal systems as well as about opportunities and methods for training lay (volunteer) judges, justices and arbiters. They will elaborate a common charter which will establish the role of lay persons' involvement in jurisdiction in criminal and civil matters as a vital component within a democratic society.

"Direct involvement by voluntary representatives of the general public in jurisdiction is firmly established in most European legal systems and looks back on centuries' old tradition. Lay justices and judges are representatives of our society in the justice system. Their indispensable value for jurisdiction and arbitration is to be located in their experience of life, in their specialised knowledge of social circumstances as well as in their professional knowledge. No society should willingly dispense with this vital principle of directly lived democracy", this was the heartfelt call by the Chairman of the Magistrates' Association of England and Wales, **John Thornhill**, addressed to politicians in Europe. Participants in the symposium gave expression to their concern that as a result of reforms in the justice system, for example in Finland, Austria, Spain or Germany, direct involvement of committed members of the public in state power will be sacrificed to imprudent saving policies. *"We want the principle of lay involvement in jurisdiction in Europe to be a basic value for Europe",* declared the German chairperson of the Federal Association of voluntary lay justices and judges, Berlin Regional deputy minister **Hasso Lieber**. *"The call for increased public participation in democratic decision making cannot be undermined by opportunities for direct public participation by members of the general public which already exist being dismantled."*

As suggested by the Finnish association president **Matti Laukkanen**, participants at the meeting agreed too that they would support setting up national representative bodies in European countries in which there is as yet no separate organisation of lay justices and judges.

The project to strengthen and extend lay involvement in jurisdiction which is being funded with EU support, is being run in cooperation with the European Academy Berlin. Valuable support and hints for their 'route towards Europe' were given to participants in addition by the German Federal Ministry of Justice. The Minister, Sabine Leutheusser-Schnarrenberger, had instructed that an extensive message of welcome was transmitted to commence symposium activities.

Next year, in 2011, the associations and organisations will meet in London for their next exchange of views and experience, on the occasion of the celebrations marking the 650th anniversary of voluntary magistrates and Justices of the Peace in England and Wales.

The internet site www.layjudgeforum.eu has been set up to serve as an information source and resource.

Voluntary lay involvement in jurisdiction and arbitration exists in various forms, amongst other places, in the following European countries: Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Russia, Poland, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Austria, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France, Spain, Portugal, Belgium, England and Wales, Scotland.

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