



Presentation to the European Parliament's plenary of the European Ombudsman Annual Report 2018

Speech - **City** Strasbourg - **Country** France - **Date** 15/01/2020

Good evening and thank you to Mr Jahr and the shadow rapporteurs for your work on this report.

It is always a great pleasure to present the annual reports of my office to Parliament however, this year is particularly significant, as I am presenting our work to a new Parliament, with many new Members and which four weeks ago voted confidence in me and in that work by electing me for a second mandate, I am very grateful for that trust and I intend fully to live up to it.

I also very much welcome the presence of Commissioner Sefcovic at this debate, which comes at the very beginning of this Commission's mandate and I wish it well in the vital work it does for everyone in Europe and also for many beyond our borders.

Honourable Members, as Ombudsman I am the bridge between citizens and the EU administration when problems arise and complaints are made. The complaints come from individuals, civil society organisations, businesses, journalists and often from members of this parliament.

We apply not only EU law in our analysis but also the principles of good administration, seeking a just outcome for citizens, who are often overwhelmed by the at times technocratic nature and distance of the EU administration. We are not advocates but we try to create a balanced playing field between the often powerless complainant and the very powerful institutions.

The year 2018 saw a strong increase in complaints that fall within my mandate, and this continued in 2019. This is not because the EU administration lowered its standards but because many more people became aware of the work of my office and what it has achieved and can achieve.

I am grateful to the EU institutions, agencies and bodies for their cooperation in this work. The vast majority of cases are dealt with through a strong collaborative engagement with the administration and it is important to acknowledge that.

Yes, I highlight problems, because that is my job, but I also witness all of the good work of EU officials and have indeed publicly and tangibly acknowledged it through an awards scheme introduced to showcase and praise their work and to share good practice throughout the



administration.

As in previous years, accountability and transparency related inquiries made up the highest proportion of my office's work.

In 2018, I also used one of the Ombudsman's infrequently used powers: that of submitting a Special Report to the European Parliament. This was only the second time I had done so since my first election as Ombudsman.

In 2013, I told Parliament that this power should be used very rarely and only in particularly serious cases where an institution does not act upon Ombudsman recommendations.

This Special Report concerned an inquiry into the accountability of the Council of the EU, notably through the lack of transparency of the legislative processes used for discussing and amending draft EU legislation.

The public has a right to know how their governments contribute to shaping EU legislation. Without that right being exercised, the 'blame Brussels' culture will continue with national Ministers obscuring their own role in the making of laws that affect their citizens.

I was very grateful to receive the overwhelming support of the Plenary for my proposals. While these recommendations have met some resistance from larger Member States, I welcome the growing coalition of governments in Council that have publicly expressed support for such changes.

At the moment, it is ten Member States and I hope that the current Presidency and the following German Presidency will take up this issue of importance to European democracy and indeed legitimacy.

As the European Ombudsman, I also coordinate the European Network of Ombudsmen - which consists of 96 offices in 36 European countries with the European Parliament's Committee on Petitions being a member as well. The 2018 annual conference took place in April in the European Parliament in Brussels, with Michel Barnier as keynote speaker, and I am very grateful for the highly professional support of Parliament in helping us make the event such a success.

Honourable Members, at the start of the Ombudsman's new five year mandate it is important to ask and to examine what role it should play within the architecture of the EU in 2020 and beyond.

If the Von der Leyen Commission is going to be the "geopolitical" Commission, and become more involved in migration issues, foreign policy, defence cooperation and in tackling the global climate crisis - alongside several EU agencies - then who will provide oversight of this expansion?

This Parliament will provide the democratic oversight, and the Ombudsman must also



provide oversight of an EU administration which arguably is more directly hands on and on the ground than ever before. Whether it is Frontex coordinating forced return flights for migrants, or EASO interviewing asylum seekers in the Greek islands, or the European Defence Agency trying to envisage the technology required for a 21st century battlefield, the EU is changing and so the Ombudsman must also adapt in order to keep pace with that change.

However, the reality is that the Office consists of less than 70 posts. We are receiving record numbers of complaints and dealing with more and more complex issues. The lack of resources of my Office has already been recognised by Parliament in the annual budgetary process and in the ongoing revision of the Ombudsman statute. However I do ask that this issue is discussed further and in a more comprehensive way, and especially with the Commission and Council, and I hope we can find an agreed way forward.

It is in the interest of all of us, that the Ombudsman's office is fully equipped and resourced for the 21st century. We must be able to fulfil our role under the EU treaties, in line with the expectations of European citizens, and in this new "geopolitical" world.

Thank you.