

Annual Report 2019- European Parliament

Speech - **City** Brussels - **Country** Belgium - **Date** 09/03/2021

Good evening, and I'd like first of all to thank Madame Guillaume and all of the shadow rapporteurs for your work on this report.

I also welcome the presence of Commissioner Sinkevičius today.

But I would like to begin by also thanking the staff of the Parliament who have worked so hard for this last year to ensure the continuation of its important work and keep everyone safe.

I also thank my own staff for ensuring that our service to the public continued at a high level despite the personal and professional challenges that all of us have experienced.

This devastating pandemic has taught us many lessons including the critical importance of trust in institutions, of being open and honest with the public in a time of crisis, of how everyone benefits from collaboration and of how central public administrations remain in the resolution of major crises.

All of these matters go to the heart of what an Ombudsman does.

In addition, the European Ombudsman is a part of the rule of law infrastructure of this democratic union. I am therefore heartened when I hear this parliament champion support for the rule of law in the member states aware that this support must also be demonstrated in everything the EU administration itself does.

All of these issues have been reflected in the complaints I received in 2020, and which I have sought to address through my own-initiative strategic work. Never more so than in challenging times, are the highest standards of good administration and transparency required to reassure the public that decisions taken are correct, proportionate, and transparent, and that measures will be implemented properly and fairly.

In the absence of this, public trust will decline and the challenges faced by administrations in encouraging the public to take certain actions to beat the pandemic may be hindered.

Your report and our debate today concerns the work of my Office in 2019, which was the final year of my first full term and coincided with my re-election in December 2019. I would like to



again take the opportunity to thank you for your vote of confidence in my work.

In 2019, over 2000 people submitted complaints to my Office, a number of which I would like to highlight.

One which has particular relevance in the current context, concerned the way in which the **European Medicines Agency** engages with pharmaceutical companies before they apply for authorisations to market their medicines. The inquiry, which also included a public consultation, resulted in EMA introducing measures to improve the independence and objectivity of the process.

Specifically, EMA agreed to introduce a log of the scientific advice concerning medicines going through the market authorisation process. This advice will be made public once the medicine is approved for sale in Europe. EMA has also said that, to the greatest extent possible, the experts who are significantly involved in advising pharmaceutical companies in the pre-market application phase will not be those who draft EMA's evaluation report for a new medicine.

In the current context, where EMA has been required to make recommendations on vaccines for COVID-19 in record time, it has been working with a fast-track procedure. This is something I am currently looking into, as part of my work in 2020.

Parliament will be aware of my Office's ongoing work on **Council transparency**. Two cases in particular demonstrate how the absence of such transparency has important real-life consequences.

One concerned the Council's refusal to increase the transparency around the way in which national ministers negotiate the annual EU fishing quotas. The all-night negotiations are legendary and their secrecy has long been taken for granted. But the world has never before been as acutely conscious of fish stocks and sustainability, and the EU never before as ambitious about the protection of our fragile environment. A new approach, in my view, is therefore imperative. Some advances in transparency have been made by Commissioner Sinkevičius last year, but more needs to be done by the Council.

Another case concerned the lack of transparency around the positions of national authorities on the risk assessment of the effect of pesticides on bees. This involved guidance given by EFSA as far back as 2013 and which has yet to be acted on. The lack of transparency allows this vital advice simply to sit there with no capacity for the public to influence change because they are not cannot find out who is blocking the adoption of this guidance. I fully appreciate the need for space to deliberate but not, as in this case, apparently indefinitely.

An important inquiry I closed in 2019 concerned way in which the then **Commission Secretary General** was appointed. Despite an initial negative response to my recommendations, within a few months, the Commission did conduct a specific appointment procedure for a new Secretary-General to serve under the new President, President Von der Leyen.



That case demonstrated a notable feature of Ombudsman work. Sometimes a result can be achieved immediately, at other times it takes time for a recommendation to be fully realised especially if it involves a change in a cultural mindset or a different approach by a different administration.

The two Council cases referenced above are cases in point. Given the pressure for greater transparency – reinforced by the pandemic – and given the EU's environment and climate ambitions, I predict a different result should similar cases arise in the future.

In June 2019, it was my great pleasure to present the winners of the second edition of the **Award for Good Administration**, an important way of recognising the overwhelmingly good work of the EU administration. There were numerous inspiring projects, with the overall award going to the teams from the European Commission that worked on the EU initiative to reduce plastic pollution and raise awareness. We are now looking forward to the third edition of the Award, which will be held online in June of this year.

As European Ombudsman, I also coordinate the **European Network of Ombudsmen** - which comprises national and regional ombudsman institutions from 36 European countries, and including with the Parliament's Committee on Petitions. The 2019 annual conference took place in April in the Parliament premises in Brussels and, ahead of the European elections, the main theme was how to strengthen the participation of citizens in the democratic process.

Looking ahead, I am eager to continue the implementation of our 'Towards 2024' strategy. I hope to achieve further positive impact on the EU administration, maintain the real-life relevance of our work and, by raising public awareness of our activities, enable citizens further to exercise their rights.

Honourable Members, the Parliament and Ombudsman are important allies in ensuring accountability of the EU. The Parliament provides democratic oversight, and my Office provides administrative oversight. I thank you again for your great support for the office of the European Ombudsman and as we hopefully emerge from the pandemic, I look forward to continuing our valuable work together over the coming years.

Thank you.