



“Mediterranean: from the Sea that separates us to the Sea that unites us”

Speech - **City** Brussels - **Country** Belgium - **Date** 04/10/2021

Good morning,

- Thank you very much Andreas and colleagues for inviting me to speak to you today and it is great to see that several of you have been able to gather in person for this conference
- another signal that some form of normal life is returning.
- From my conversations with many Ombudsmen from all parts of Europe over the last 18 months it was strikingly clear that the pandemic had highlighted the importance of having strong and independent ombudsman offices.
- COVID-19 disrupted lives, societies, governments but what stood out for me was the way in which it also exposed societal attitudes towards marginalised people, whether the elderly, people with disabilities, asylum seekers, migrant workers, and people in institutions including prisons. So many of these people suffered disproportionately and died in disproportionate numbers from COVID 19.
- All of this went to the heart of Ombudsman work and many of you and your staff – despite the changed working arrangements – did your bit to ensure that your administrations paid attention and did not look away when you highlighted their suffering and their exclusion and I commend your work, your commitment, and your humanity.
- Your topics of discussion today confirm that while we are still grappling with COVID, we are also deep within another crisis and one whose effects we can no longer pretend not to notice or care about or feel safe because they're happening in places far away from ourselves and our families.
- I am of course talking about the climate crisis.
- We looked with horror at the devastating fires in Greece over the summer. The photo of an 81 year old woman, hand to heart, eyes closed, head thrown back as the fires raged behind her on the island of Evia went around the world. It seemed like a terrible warning: what is happening to this person - the loss and devastation around her - will one day happen to all of us and more particularly to our children and grandchildren.
- It is profoundly disturbing to contemplate the fact that our young people are now growing up with a threat like none other hanging over them. Many already suffer anxiety, no longer just about the troubles of adolescence and growing up, but rather about the security of the globe in which they hope to grow up in.
- Greece was not of course the only country to suffer the sharp end of the climate crisis this year.
- There were catastrophic fires in California and Siberia; catastrophic flooding and subsequent deaths in Germany and Belgium in July. Record temperatures in Europe. And many more climate milestones reached - too numerous to mention here.
- The most recent UN report pointed out that humans are **unequivocally** to blame for



climate change and some of the changes are irreversible.

- Contrast the urgency of that report - and the many that have gone before - with the short-term decision making that characterises our democracies. Environmental decisions and policy-making requires long-term thinking often a challenge for politicians who may not see beyond a single electoral cycle
- One commentator on environmental issues recently put it like this: *“No government, even the most progressive, is yet prepared to contemplate the transformation we need: a global programme that places the survival of humanity and the rest of life on Earth above all other issues. We need not just new policy, but a new ethics.”*
- This is where ombudsmen can play a role.
- While we cannot determine how policies should look or make scientific assessments of draft laws, we *do* have soft powers that can be hugely influential.
- We can put issues on the table, we can ask how decisions were made, we can ensure that ethics rules are enforced properly when it comes to issues such as lobbying or revolving doors when those who move out of the public sector and into the private risk damaging the public interest in their insider knowledge and networks slows down or prevents the passage of climate friendly policies. And if the rules are not strong enough, or non-existent, we can ask why is this the case?
- In other words, we can help define a new ethics structure or at the very least bring climate concerns to the forefront of our work.
- Tackling the climate crisis will mean difficult decisions - it will be up to Ombudsman to make sure the different options are considered fully, and that the concerns of vulnerable parts of the population are taken into account.
- For my part, I can see that civil society organisations are increasingly turning to my office on question related to the environment.
- I have had complaints related to the sustainability assessment of the **EU-Mercosur trade** deal, how the Commission assessed conflicts of interests when it asks companies to do studies that can feed into policy-making; and why the public cannot access Member State positions on how to assess whether pesticides are harmful to bees.
- Other ‘green’ inquiries cover the lack of transparency regarding the projects funded by the European Investment Bank; how the Commission assesses the sustainability of projects selected to be on a list of projects that can be fast-tracked and receive EU funds; or public access to Member State positions during the annual discussions to divide fishing quotas for the coming year.
- Some of these cases have led to real change.
- But a key result is that the topic gets discussed. The public becomes familiar with the fact that it is their national governments - and not an amorphous ‘EU’ - taking decisions.
- And when that happens people can see failed ambition, unclear decisions or trade offs - and then they can decide whether this is something they are prepared to accept or whether they want their governments to take a different approach.
- Ombudsmen are not activists on particular policy issues.
- But neither are we simply passive receptacles for complaints.
- We occupy a special place between public administrations and citizens and are a trusted voice.
- We can use this voice to push administrations to do better. We can anticipate trends and work out the ethical and accountability parameters that public institutions need to take in



order to be considered to be working in the public interest.

- And we can use civil society and media to amplify our voices.
- When over 200 medical journals recently signed their open letter calling climate change the greatest threat to public health, they also asked that governments cooperate and invest in combatting the environmental crisis with the same degree of urgency used to fight COVID.
- This is an entirely reasonable - and rational - ask. As ombudsmen we can contribute to this objective by ourselves deciding to treat this topic with urgency.
- Thank you again for the invitation to speak - I wish you an enjoyable and fruitful conference.