

European Ombudsman's speech at Plenary Debate on the Annual Report 2020

Speech - **City** Strasbourg - **Country** France - **Date** 14/02/2022

Good evening,

Firstly, let me remember late President Sassoli, a great loss for Europe.

I would also like to congratulate President Metsola for your election.

Honourable Members, let me thank the rapporteur Ms Evi and all the shadow rapporteurs for their work on this report. As Irish has become a fully official EU language this year, I am happy to speak in Irish this evening.

The first year of the pandemic was challenging for everyone, with high levels of uncertainty.

While the EU needed to act quickly, it was crucial to maintain transparency and accountability to allow citizens a better understanding of the decision-making process

Part of my role as European Ombudsman is to assist the institutions in this process.

At the beginning of the pandemic I looked into how the **European Centre for Disease Control** (ECDC) fulfilled its role. I found that the agency struggled to gather such information in a timely manner due to the low responsiveness of Member States, the ones who could provide such figures. After my analysis, I made a series of suggestions to the ECDC, to ensure a more proactive communication of its assessments and recommendations to the public. The Agency agreed and will now promote a more proactive information flow. I am also glad to know that the co-legislators decided to update the ECDC's mandate, an example of how quickly institutions can act to learn from challenges and improve.

One of the first consequences of the pandemic was the shift to remote working methods in all institutions. My Office experienced a fast and smooth transition, and I want to thank my staff for ensuring that our service to the public continued to run despite the personal and professional challenges we all had to face.

Being conscious that the impact of the pandemic was even stronger on vulnerable people, in June 2020 I opened a strategic initiative into how the Commission accommodated the needs of



its **staff with disabilities** in the context of these new working methods.

Despite the pandemic, the **number of complaints received** remained stable, and my work continued to focus on transparency, integrity and fundamental rights.

An important piece of work concerned the decision of the Commission to award a contract to carry out a study on sustainable finance to **BlackRock**, a company with financial interests in the sector at issue. Even a potential case of conflict of interest can be detrimental to the EU credibility. This is why I suggested to the Commission to update its guidelines on public procurement and to consider strengthening the conflict of interest provisions in the Financial Regulation. I was glad to see that, when updating the Regulation, Parliament took my inquiry into account, a clear example of the impact that a coalition of forces can have to improve the EU administration.

Another example of impact was a case of ‘revolving doors’ of the then executive director of the **European Banking Authority (EBA)**. He took up a position as CEO of an association representing banks and financial institutions, which the EBA supervised. Keeping in mind the equilibrium between right to work and reputational risk for the EU, I recommended the EBA to set up clear rules to forbid specific moves for senior staff at their term of office and to suspend access to confidential information for staff known to be moving to the private sector. I welcomed the fact that the Authority accepted my recommendations, showing its commitment to high standards of ethics.

Throughout the year, protection of **fundamental rights** continued to be part of my Office work: we issued guidelines on **multilingualism** for the institutions, and I followed up on a previous inquiry into **Frontex** complaints mechanism.

Meanwhile, sustainability have rightfully become more relevant for the EU. This is why, following a complaint my office received, I found maladministration in the Commission’s decision to end negotiations on the **EU-Mercosur agreement** before a sustainability impact assessment had been finalised.

In 2020, I continued to work on the **transparency of legislative process in the Council**. The importance of this case lies in the simple but too often neglected fact that national governments distance themselves from decisions that seem to be taken by “Brussels” while their own representatives were the ones taking them. Small steps towards more transparency were made but much work is still to be done.

Despite difficult moments, 2020 was also a year of celebration for my Office, with the **25th anniversary** of its creation. I was proud to celebrate with an online conference with the **European Network of Ombudsmen**, and Commission Vice-President Šefčovič, who also participated to meetings on the implications of Covid-19 on the ombudsman institutions. This year, the annual **ENO meeting** will take place here at Parliament’s premises in Strasbourg on 27 April, in the context of the French Presidency of the Council, with a focus on digitalisation and public administration.



Two years after the beginning of the pandemic we know that open and accountable decision-making is key to support and protect the public in this difficult moment. I am optimistic that the Union will come out of this stronger than before, and I hope that some of these improvements will come from the contribution of my Office, which I often say is a small Office with a big mandate .

Thanks again for your support. I look forward to continuing our co-operation.