

European Network of Ombudsmen Conference 2022. European Ombudsman's opening remarks

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Chers collègues, chers amis, chers invités d'honneur. J'ai le plaisir de vous accueillir à Strasbourg pour la conférence du Réseau européen des médiateurs. Cette année, nous l'accueillons en collaboration avec la Mediatrice de la République Mme Hédon et aussi avec le grand soutien du Maire de Strasbourg Mme Barseghian et je les remercie toutes les deux ainsi que leurs équipes pour ce soutien.

But before we begin our formal proceedings, I would like to pay tribute to the memory of one of our former colleagues, Alex Brenninkmeijer, who very sadly passed away earlier this month. Alex had been serving as the Dutch member of the European Court of Auditors and prior to that he had served with distinction as the Ombudsman of the Netherlands.

Alex and I both served as national Ombudsmen at the same time and I was always impressed by his clear-sightedness, his humanity and indeed by his sense of humour. On behalf of our network, I send our deepest condolences to Alex's family and friends and to his colleagues.

When we began to plan this conference, we did not imagine the horrific circumstances in which it would be taking place. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has unleashed a reign of terror and of death on the people of that country, and Europe and its allies struggle to react in a way that will bring an end to this barbarism as quickly as possible. The politics are complicated, the economic self-interests cause moral confusion, but history, as ever, is unlikely fully to appreciate the nuances of the present day.

This is a war that we can see up close, in real time, in which we can hear the testimony of those who remain and those who have fled for their lives.

I will not pretend that I can imagine what it is like to be there but we are honoured today to have the Ukrainian Ombudswoman, Mme Denisova, with us and she will speak of the continuing courageous work of her office at a time of immense personal danger to each and every one of them.

At times like this, we may wonder at how we can make our day to day work as Ombudsmen relevant and useful in this crisis. We will hear from many Ombudsmen about the great work they are doing in assisting Ukrainian refugees and we shall also hear from Ombudsmen who have



sought to assist refugees for whom being welcomed into Europe was rather more challenging.

But while our immediate purpose is obvious and tangible, we should not forget that the reason we exist at all is to play our role in upholding the rule of law, in holding administrations to account, in giving real life to democratic values, and, as I sometimes put it, to make sure that the good guys stay good and the bad guys are called out.

At a time of ceaseless commentary about the fracturing of democracy we must never forget that we are part of the cement that holds democracy together and be prepared to challenge its erosion at every turn.

Our later session on the digitalisation of public services may seem rather prosaic when compared with the challenges just mentioned, but its importance lies precisely in relation to that vital connection between those who govern and those who are governed. A public administration that risks being separated from its citizens by a badly thought out approach to the very technologies that are supposed to connect, is a public administration gone wrong and one that will inevitably lessen trust – a key element of a functioning democracy. Technological advances can of course bring huge benefits to the administration of public services but, as some of the colleagues will tell you in that later session, we have to be alert to potential harms.

It is now my pleasure to introduce via video link the EU's Commissioner for Home Affairs who is directly involved with the EU's management of the refugee crisis, largely through the implementation of the Temporary Protection Directive. This Directive actually dates from 2001 but this is the first refugee crisis for which it has been triggered, following unanimous support to do so by the member states.

The Commissioner continues to call attention to every element of the fallout of the war, from the systematic rape of women, to human trafficking, to the separation of children from their families and to all the myriad horrors that this war has unleashed on the population of Ukraine.

Mme Johansson recently stated that “we must be coordinated, horizontally between Member States and vertically so that national, regional and local levels work together effectively.”

She has also said in relation to what protection means for refugees once they have arrived in a member state:

“That means money for food, a roof over their head, medical visits, education for their children and getting a job that allows them scope to rebuild. It also means being safe from exploitation or even bodily harm, while they are at their most vulnerable. All of this requires systems that work under pressure, that are joined-up at each administrative level, and that are transparent – for the user and the administrator.”

She is therefore perfectly placed to let this network of Ombudsmen know how best we can support and monitor the efforts being made by the EU to give shelter and protection to all of those forced to leave their homes and their families in Ukraine.



Thank you Commissioner Johannsson for opening our conference today and the floor is yours.