

## European Network of Ombudsmen Conference 2022 Opening Second day of Conference

Speech - **City** Strasbourg - **Country** France - **Date** 10/05/2022

Good morning colleagues and welcome to today's session of our Conference. Let me again express my thanks to the Mayor of Strasbourg and her team for the wonderful hospitality we enjoyed last night and I hope that you all also enjoyed meeting up with old colleagues and getting to know our new ones.

Today we will continue our discussion on the challenges of digitalization and we shall also hear about a work in progress that my Office commissioned from the OECD on how Ombudsmen can play a role in monitoring the use of the vast amount of money that the EU will be spending on assisting member states to recover from the pandemic.

Like all of you I'm sure, I found yesterday's initial discussion on the digitalisation of public and indeed private services very thought provoking and it made me reflect on how it impacts on my own life both negatively and positively.

Just a few decades ago we would have considered it miraculous that so much is accessible to us without leaving our homes. I remember having to go into the centre of Dublin and queue for long periods of time to apply for a passport, or have my car registered for tax and even to get a small amount of money from a bank meant going into a physical building, filling out a form and queuing again until a cashier was free.

But I also recall that for my late mother, who lived alone after my father had died, the physical, personal nature of those services were not a nuisance but rather a way of keeping her connected to her community, and having someone to guide her through an occasional task that was complex gave her confidence. Having to go to the bank, having to go into town to meet someone about insurance or some other matter was not for her a nuisance but rather linked her to a life outside the four walls of her home in the way that walking to church or visiting a library or attending the local community centre also did.

The very evocative word 'dematerialisation' that was used yesterday also made me reflect not just on the dematerialization of public services but in many cities and rural areas in particular the dematerialization of communities as the people and the services both private and public – from banks to libraries – now move online therefore breaking those tiny connections that even if we're not always aware of it, sustain us not just in a material sense but also in a psychological



one.

But we cannot and would not want to turn the clock back and one day generation Y and X and Z will also be elderly, but will never have known a pre digital time and their way of finding connections will hopefully make their lives meaningful in a different way. But for the moment, the love affair between public administrations and technology risks excluding the people that should be front and centre of their work. One of the colleagues raised this point yesterday and again made me reflect on how increasingly online services are designed in a way to prevent human to human contact as much as possible. And , also increasingly, if that contact is made, it has the character of a call centre where niche or complex questions are very difficult to get an answer to.

My experience as an Ombudsman is that the greatest stress is caused, not always by the nature of the problem itself, but rather by not being heard. Stress is alleviated when somebody does listen, when someone hears the specific details of a complaint that doesn't always fit the checklist on a website. Even if the complaint is ultimately not upheld, in many cases, people are satisfied that at least someone has listened to them and both complainant and complaint handler have done all they can both to explain and resolve the issue.

And while it is not specifically a topic for today, the problems outlined above pale in comparison to the potential challenges that the use of artificial intelligence in public administration might pose or even pose already. Not answering a phone is one thing, but importing bias or other negative elements into algorithms that in the future may determine so much about our daily lives is, to use an American expression, a very different ball game. I imagine that this Network will return to this topic.