

Plenary Debate on the Annual Report 2021

Speech - **City** Strasbourg - **Country** France - **Date** 13/03/2023

Good evening.

Let me begin by thanking Rapporteur Pelletier, the shadow rapporteurs and the Petitions Committee for their strong endorsement of our work in 2021.

The COVID crisis continued to dominate much of our lives that year but since then the multiple crises provoked by Russia's invasion of Ukraine have done so. The loss of life has been immense as has the devastation of Ukrainian families forced to flee their homes to the safety of the EU and elsewhere.

The telling of the Ukrainian story includes passionate appeals for the protection of democratic values and for the safeguarding of democratic institutions. It is those democratic institutions that are our first line of defence against the weakening of the rule of law and against corruption.

Late last year, the Qatargate scandal emerged with allegations of the buying of European Parliamentary influence by foreign governments. The power that this parliament exerts was demonstrated by the fact that this was and is a globally reported story.

The European Parliament has power that both good and bad actors wish to exploit. It is also the body that citizens look to as the protector of their rights so it is imperative for trust to be restored.

I am therefore pleased that the process of internal reform of Parliament's rules on ethics has begun and it is in everyone's interests that it be as transparent as possible.

Transparency continued to be a key area of my work. It is the means by which EU citizens can exercise their Treaty based right to take part in the democratic life of the Union.

2021 marked twenty years since the EU's access to documents regulation 1049 came into force. Following a complaint, I opened an inquiry into how the Commission handled an access to documents request for text messages between its President and the CEO of Pfizer. I found maladministration as the initial position of the Commission was that such messages do not constitute potentially releasable documents under the access Regulation. However, regulation 1049 makes it clear that it is the content that matters and not the medium. If text messages



concern EU policies and decisions, they should be treated as EU documents.

I asked eight EU institutions and agencies what measures they have in place for documenting work-related texts and instant messaging and then published practical recommendations to help the EU administration. I was glad to note the Commission's positive engagement with those recommendations in subsequent meetings with other institutions on this matter.

I looked at how EU administration deals with moves by its staff to the private sector. I found that the European Defence Agency should have forbidden its former chief executive from becoming a strategic advisor at aerospace firm Airbus due to a conflict -of -interest risk.

This case mirrored a 2020 case in which the head of the European Banking Authority had been permitted to take up a position with a major financial lobbying firm. Both bodies agreed to implement my recommendations on the forbidding of problematic moves and on providing clear guidelines for staff.

I also began a broad investigation into how the Commission deals with revolving doors. An analysis of 100 files revealed a tendency to underestimate the potentially corrosive effects of the phenomenon and a consequential reluctance to forbid jobs temporarily when they posed unacceptable risks.

The Commission has since agreed to strengthen its implementation of the rules.

In 2021 I concluded an inquiry into how Frontex deals with alleged human rights breaches through its complaints' mechanism. I asked Frontex to make clear to its officers that they should accept and transmit any complaints they receive, and that Frontex information materials should make clear that complainants would not be penalised for submitting a complaint.

EU citizens also have a strong interest in knowing how EU policies and EU-funded projects affect the environment. In 2021, I therefore suggested that the European Investment Bank provide greater public information on the environmental implications of the projects its finances.

I also opened an inquiry into how the Commission will ensure transparency and accountability in the implementation of the EU's €700 billion Recovery and Resilience Facility and I note the positive work of the Parliament in this matter.

I will close by also noting our 2021 Awards for Good Administration through which my office acknowledges the great work done by EU public servants. The 2021 overall award winners, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid and the European External Action Service, helped to repatriate over half a million EU citizens stranded around the world due to Covid.

Our next Awards ceremony for 2023 will take place in June and will showcase some remarkable projects undertaken by the EU administration including by this Parliament. I look forward to sharing them with you and with the public



In the meantime, with your support, I will continue to do my part in promoting accountability, transparency, and trust in the EU's bodies and institutions. The EU is not just an economic force in the world, it is also a moral force for good and as such its administration needs to set and lead by example.

Thank you again for your support and cooperation.