

Speech by the European Ombudsman, P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, on the occasion of the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the institution and the launch of a new visual identity

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Introduction

Mr Vice President of the European Parliament, Honourable Members of this august institution, fellow ombudsmen, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen!

I am delighted that you have joined us here this evening to mark the fifteenth anniversary to the day of the European Ombudsman institution.

My predecessor Jacob Söderman, who left me with such a difficult act to follow, cannot be with us this evening to share with us his recollections and reflections from 27 September 1995, when he presided over the official opening of the European Ombudsman. I would like to thank Jacob publicly for the work he did for European citizens.

Since 27 September 1995, the Ombudsman has answered more than 36,000 complainants and completed more than 3,800 inquiries into possible maladministration. By responding to complaints, proposing friendly solutions and making recommendations, the Ombudsman has helped the European institutions to provide redress, to raise the quality of their administration and — as a result — to come closer to the European citizens.

But more than that: as a result of dealing with complaints, the Ombudsman has developed a real insight into trends in maladministration, systemic problems and structural weaknesses. Armed with this information, he has sought to do the thing that many of our complainants want most – to make sure that what happened to them is not repeated in the future. By engaging with the institutions, we have worked to ensure that the wider lessons from complaint-handling are learnt across the administration.

This is of huge consequence. As my UK ombudsman colleague says repeatedly (and here she speaks, I am sure, for all of my national colleagues), the Ombudsman should be seen as a positive source of help and not a negative force simply pointing out where things go wrong. I am wholly committed to this philosophy.



Support for the institution

This evening offers an appropriate occasion for me to express thanks and appreciation to all those who, over the last fifteen years, have provided the Ombudsman with vital support.

Firstly, the European Parliament, which not only hosts us this evening but which has made constructive relations with the Ombudsman a priority. Without Parliament's support — on the political, administrative and budgetary fronts — we would be much the weaker.

I would also like to thank all those within the EU administration who have shown their support for the Ombudsman's work down the years. From the four Commissioners who have been responsible for relations with the Ombudsman to officials co-ordinating the Ombudsman's files, I say thank you for your commitment to resolving citizens' complaints. I understand, particularly in these straitened times, that it is both costly and time-consuming to respond to complaints. I do not underestimate the work you do.

I would further like to thank my fellow ombudsmen and to welcome the ombudsmen and members of their staff from Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, and the UK, who have taken the time out of their busy schedules to join us this evening. My colleagues in the European Network of Ombudsmen have helped to resolve the complaints of thousands of citizens who originally turned to the European Ombudsman. They have also provided solid support and sound advice through the years, for which I am eternally grateful.

I want, in addition, to pay tribute to the staff of my office, to whom so much of the institution's success is due. Every day, they bring with them to work the conviction that serving the citizen is our primary purpose and *raison d'être*. The five guiding principles of our institution, which are Integrity, Fairness, Accountability, Dialogue, and Service, constitute the touchstone for all their actions.

Finally, I would like to thank and welcome those who have justified our existence over the years — the complainants who have used our services. I am always encouraged by the steady stream of complaints — not of course because they represent dissatisfaction with the administration — but because they show that people are confident that the Ombudsman will examine their case independently and impartially, and try to resolve the problem if possible.

The Strategy for the Mandate

This evening should be as much about looking to the future as reflecting on the past.

I am, therefore, delighted that this event serves as an appropriate occasion for us to launch new visual identities for both the European Ombudsman and for the European Network of



Ombudsmen, for whom a separate visual identity has been designed. I think Mr Apeloig has brilliantly captured the essence of our services in his powerful and compelling logos. I would like to thank him for his work and to acknowledge publicly my appreciation for his contribution.

Finding ways to reach out to citizens to inform them about their rights and how to make use of those rights has been a key priority for me as European Ombudsman. I am confident that our new visual identity will help us project to all our audiences the image of an institution that is accessible, fair, and citizen-centred.

This evening sees another hugely important step for our institution, with the launch of a strategy for the Ombudsman's 2009-2014 mandate. A copy of the strategy is included in the pack that you will receive at the end of the evening.

The strategy seeks to provide a clear statement of the Ombudsman's mission, aspirations and guiding principles. Building on what has been accomplished so far, it outlines a series of objectives and priorities, which are designed to achieve the Ombudsman's overarching aim of, first, ensuring that EU citizens enjoy their rights fully, and, second, enhancing the quality of the EU administration.

The strategy has been developed through an extensive process of consultation with internal and external stakeholders. I am very grateful to all those who contributed to the success of this project for their many positive and creative suggestions.

Let me very briefly outline the five objectives we have set ourselves:

One: We want to listen to our stakeholders, by obtaining regular feedback from complainants, further developing contacts with the EU institutions, and engaging with civil society. Moreover, we will seek — via the European Network of Ombudsmen — to identify best practices.

Two: We want to deliver results faster, by reducing the time needed to close inquiries and by developing simplified procedures to promote, where possible, a rapid resolution of complaints.

Three: We want to have a positive impact on the Union's administrative culture, by emphasising the Ombudsman's role as a resource to help improve administrative practices and by focusing more on systemic questions.

Four: We want to provide timely and useful information, in an accessible way, to our stakeholders and to the public. In short, we want to communicate better.

Five: We want to constantly rethink how we use our resources. We will seek to ensure the highest standards of administration internally and will consistently monitor and increase the quality of our work.

By focusing on these objectives, we are endeavouring to help the Union to deliver on the promises it has made to citizens in the Treaty of Lisbon concerning fundamental rights,



enhanced transparency, and greater opportunities for participation in the Union's policy-making.

In so doing, we also seek to make our own, modest contribution to the lofty goals of deepening of the rule of law and to the enhancement of the quality of democracy in the European legal order.

Conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen! From the very beginning, the Ombudsman has been guided by a vision of citizenship that results in the empowerment of citizens, respect for their rights and an administrative culture of service. He has been guided by the vision of an EU administration that welcomes complaints, embraces change, and embodies this culture of service. We are not quite there yet but significant progress has been made.

As we move along this path towards a top class EU administration, I hope that those of you within the institutions continue to see the Ombudsman as an ally, not a foe. I hope that those of you who use our services feel empowered by the experience and satisfied that the problem that you encountered has been dealt with and should not be visited on someone else.

Thank you.