

Address to European Parliament on Annual Report 2013

Speech - **City** Strasbourg - **Country** France - **Date** 15/01/2015

Strasbourg, 15 January 2015

Thank you President.

Honourable Members, I would like to start by putting on record my deep appreciation for the overwhelming vote of support I received in this chamber for my re-election last month. It is a huge source of support for me personally, for my strategy and for my colleagues who work hard on a daily basis to implement that strategy. Such wide parliamentary support is crucial to the success of any ombudsman, and I promise to build on that support by continuing to working closely with this parliament. I cannot operate without your support and equally I work to ensure that the people you represent will have access to an independent source of investigation and redress if they feel they have been unfairly treated by an EU institution. Our work is complementary.

Thank you, Mr. Walesa, and to all the shadow rapporteurs for your work over the past number of months on the report before us today.

The report shows a clear understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the Office of the European Ombudsman as we attempt to keep pace with evolving expectations placed upon us by European citizens. And as their directly elected representatives, you know how fast the hopes, expectations and concerns are changing of people today in Europe.

Dear Members, this is my first time addressing you in plenary however since coming into office in October 2013, I have addressed you in committee a total of eight times, including before the Petitions Committee, Budget Control Committee and Civil Liberties Committee. Each time I have benefited from your expertise, advice and support and that of the staff who support your work.

These Committee hearings, and our many one-on-one meetings, have strengthened my understanding of our work together at European level and have fed directly into the strategy I have developed for the Office.

My task as the third European Ombudsman is to take the Office to the next level and make sure



it continues to succeed and thrive. My work at the end of 2013 when I took Office and over the past year of 2014 has been about putting those words into action.

Recently, I published our five year strategy entitled “ *Towards 2019* ”, which you refer to under Article 21 in today's report. My strategy is to combine three objectives – ensure **relevance**, increase **visibility** and so achieve greater **positive impact** . To begin executing this strategy, I first undertook, as promised, an internal audit of procedures and practices of the Ombudsman's office. This involved consulting with staff at every level and is leading to a number of internal changes , including the introduction of a modern complaint handling system, a process begun by my predecessor, which will enable us to achieve greater internal efficiencies in complaint handling; a review of how we draft our case decisions to make them more citizen-focused; a review of our Key Performance Indicators and a review of our complaint inquiry processes which will allow us to identify the key cases early and to prioritise them. These changes will, I believe, lead to an overall better service to citizens.

With an office of around 70 staff, I see it as my duty to use the resources at my disposal to the maximum possible effect.

Relevance

To ensure our work becomes more relevant to the major concerns of ordinary European citizens and residents, I have made greater use of my power to launch inquiries in the public interest without necessarily a specific complaint as basis.

To that end, I appointed an Own Initiative Investigation Coordinator whose job is to drive the own initiative inquiries in collaboration with her colleagues and to ensure that the outcomes are both speedy and effective.

Last year we opened own-initiative inquiries into the transparency and balance of Commission Expert Groups, the transparency of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations, the way in which EU institutions are implementing the new rules on protecting whistle-blowers, the Commission's handling of the European Citizens Initiative; the way in which fundamental rights are protected in the EU cohesion funds programmes, and into how Frontex ensures compliance with the Charter of Fundamental Rights in its important and difficult work.

Two other major on-going inquiries of significant relevance are how the Commission manages potential conflicts of interest when EU officials leave for employment elsewhere, the so-called 'revolving doors' issue and an on-going inquiry into how the European Medicines Agency supports the transparency demands of Parliament in relation to clinical trials studies for medicines in the EU.

I appreciate the fact that the Committee on Petitions welcomes these inquiries in point 24 of its report.

Visibility



To achieve greater visibility, I have focused on ensuring that our work is better communicated to you the elected representatives, to our stakeholders, and to the public. Media commentary and media monitoring suggest that that strategy is having a significant impact with details of our cases and other work now very regularly featuring in the Brussels media outlets but also in mainstream member state media and further afield. In addition I now send you the members, a digest of our work and have demonstrated I hope my willingness to have on-going dialogue with you on subjects of mutual concern.

We have also focused on our social media outreach, and have trebled our Twitter followers in one year. I hope many of you have seen our new format Annual Report which uses many new media technologies to make it much more readable and attractive. Today we are talking about the 2013 Annual Report, delayed due to the transition year that it was for the Office but I hope to present my 2014 report to you this May.

Underpinning my media strategy is that we should communicate our work as openly and as accessibly as possible, and that in doing so, we will encourage people to come to us if they have observed instances of alleged maladministration which they believe we should investigate.

Impact

I believe the new strategy already has made a positive impact and I am very grateful to all of the officials in the institutions I have dealt with for their largely positive engagement with my office. In December 2013, we had a positive response from the Commission in two major cases. One concerned an unreasonable delay in relation to a state aid investigation into certain professional football clubs; the other concerned an alleged conflict of interest for the former chair of the Ad-Hoc Ethics Committee for Commissioners. The chairman stepped down after my intervention, and the Commission has since made the work of the Ad-Hoc Ethics Committee more transparent, which I welcome.

In relation to the European Medicines Agency, I believe the intervention of my Office, together with concerned Members of parliament and civil society, helped to make sure their new transparency policy was not rolled back as appeared to be the case when details of the new policy were announced in 2014.

Following again the strong intervention of a coalition of concerned Members of Parliament and of civil society and an inquiry by my office into the lack of transparency around the TTIP negotiations, the Council released the mandate for wider public scrutiny, which I welcome. The Commission, as you know, the Commission has also announced other steps forward on transparency. Recently we made further constructive suggestions, and I expect the Commission's response to those suggestions in March.

Finally, following a meeting I had with the President of the ECB, Mr. Draghi, last year – we were invited to advise them on their new ethics policy and I greatly welcome the willingness of the Bank to engage with us on this issue. As you know, the ECB has new banking supervision



powers and significantly increased staff numbers as a result. The aim of the new ethics policy is to allow the ECB to maintain a high level of citizen trust.

In recent weeks I have also listened carefully to the new Juncker Commission. I have been heartened by the commitments and real progress made toward greater transparency, openness and accountability and I pledge to work as collaboratively as possible with the Commission at all levels to help them achieve those goals. Indeed the Commission is actually leading on many issues of good administration in the EU today, for which they deserve our recognition.

To conclude President, can I put on record again how impressed I am by the high standards of the European civil service, of the thousands of dedicated people who work in the EU institutions and agencies all over Europe. The vast majority work hard to achieve high standards in their work and display a true ethic of public service.

However as we know, trust in both the EU and national levels of governance is not very high at the moment in Europe. There are reasons to hope that we are slowly beginning to emerge from the painful recession and banking crisis. The people of Europe will regain trust in their governing administrations when they begin to see positive changes from the decisions made for their families in their daily lives. However unlike most nation states in Europe which are largely legitimate in the eyes of their citizens, the EU administration has not yet achieved the high levels of popular legitimacy which it should in the eyes of many Europeans. Today's report correctly recognises that "wide gap" in Article 3. This is why it is so important for the EU administration to be not only of the highest possible quality, but indeed the 'gold standard' in ethics, transparency, accountability and effectiveness.

My task as European Ombudsman is to work with those institutions and agencies to help make that happen. As you the Members of the European Parliament have recently entrusted me to continue as European Ombudsman, I promise to do my best to continue working to fulfil that task.

Finally, let me conclude by again thanking the Rapporteur, the Shadow Rapporteurs, their staff and the secretariats for all the work on the report, and I look forward to listening to your contributions and questions.

Thank you.