

Speech by the European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, at the 10th National Seminar of the European Network of Ombudsmen

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Developing the European Network of Ombudsmen

“Towards 2019”

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Introduction

Mr chairman, ladies and gentlemen! In this final session of our first day's proceedings, I would like to take the opportunity to present you with my proposals for developing the European Network of Ombudsmen over the coming five years. Having been re-elected by the European Parliament last December, I now have a full mandate ahead of me, during which I intend to bring both the European Ombudsman institution and the European Network of Ombudsmen to the next level. I am conscious that this session is due to end at 17.15, so I propose to briefly explain the history and development of the Network, for the benefit of those of you who have recently taken up your roles as ombudsmen and petitions committee chairs, before presenting my plans for the future. At the end of my presentation, I would be delighted to discuss my proposals with you and to clarify anything that may be unclear.

The European Network of Ombudsmen was created in 1996 in order to exchange information about EU law and policy, and to share best practice between the national and regional ombudsmen and similar bodies of the Member States of the European Union, the candidate countries for EU membership, and the other European Economic Area countries, as well as the European Ombudsman and the Committee on Petitions of the European Parliament.



Since taking office in October 2013, I have begun developing and implementing an ambitious programme of reform, focused on three mutually reinforcing objectives:

- Impact
- Relevance
- Visibility

One of my key priorities for 2015 is to reform the Network, in line with these three objectives, to ensure that it reaches its full potential in serving the citizens and residents of Europe. Following consultation with Network members through a questionnaire at the start of 2014, discussions during the last regional and liaison seminars, input from my staff, and my own review of the Network's activities, I have drawn up a set of proposals for the development of the Network over the coming five years.

The key purpose of the Network is, and will remain, to enable Network members to be fully informed of developments in EU law and policy, particularly wherever those developments are of greatest relevance to their work at the national and regional levels, to facilitate access to expertise within the EU institutions for members of the Network, and to encourage co-operation between the European Ombudsman and other members of the Network through parallel investigations on topics of mutual interest.

Seminars

The Network seminars have a vital role to play in enabling Network members to discuss the latest developments in EU law and policy, to share their experiences regarding the implementation of EU law at the national and regional levels, and to develop their co-operation with the EU institutions and with each other.

But of the last 28 Network seminars, only two have been held in Brussels. This reduces the visibility of the Network to EU decision-makers and reduces the opportunities for interaction between the Network's members and the EU institutions.

I therefore propose:

- That the Network's national, regional, and liaison seminars continue to be held every two years, but that they all be held in Brussels;
- That the seminars focus exclusively on issues of EU law and policy, while ensuring that the topics discussed are of significant relevance to the Network members;
- That the EU institutions be invited to play a more active role in the seminars;



- That the seminars be webstreamed live, in order to enable Network staff members throughout Europe to follow the proceedings as well as interested members of the public;
- That instead of publishing the seminar proceedings as a paper publication in the months following each event, videos be made available online immediately after the event, in each of the seminar languages;
- That the "Events" section of the Extranet (i) be made available to the public, (ii) be expanded to contain all public documents from each Network seminar, and (iii) contain a publicly-accessible calendar of all events being organised not only by the European Network of Ombudsmen, but by other ombudsman networks and associations as well.

The transformation of the seminars will greatly increase their impact for the Network members and the EU institutions thanks to the greater possibilities for interaction and discussion. The relevance of the seminars will also be greatly enhanced, by re-focusing discussions on the very *raison d'être* of the Network – the latest developments in EU law and policy. And the visibility of the Network, to the EU institutions, the media, and the general public will be enhanced by holding the meetings in Brussels and webstreaming them live.

Online meetings

Interactions between national ombudsmen, regional ombudsmen, and liaison officers are greatly facilitated through the Network's seminars. But three meetings every two years do not provide for sufficient interactions between members of staff, nor for any interactions between staff working in specific areas of activity.

I therefore propose:

- To explore the possibility of organising regular webinars, videoconferences, or other such solutions to bring Network staff together on a more regular basis;
- To encourage co-operation that focuses on specific functional activities of staff through these online meetings;
- To make a dedicated space available in the Extranet for these functional groupings of staff, once established, to share information with each other throughout the year.

The development of online meetings has the potential to increase the relevance of the Network to staff members throughout member institutions and to facilitate co-operation. It also has the potential to adapt and evolve to meet changing needs, with groups being created, developed, scaled-back, or disbanded as priorities evolve.

Publications



The European Network of Ombudsmen Newsletter is currently produced four times a year, in five languages, and distributed electronically to members of the Network.

While the Newsletter has undoubtedly played a useful role in sharing information between Network members, the majority of articles contained in the Newsletter are not about EU law or policy. The added-value of the Newsletter is therefore limited for the Network, which is resource intensive in terms of the financial and human resources required for its production.

I therefore propose:

- To replace the quarterly Network Newsletter by a European Network of Ombudsmen Annual Newsletter in 2016;
- To use the Newsletter to showcase the range of the Network's activities, the achievements of the Network's members, and the service provided to the public.

The introduction of an Annual Newsletter will greatly increase the impact of the Network for European, national, and regional governments and administrations. It will make the work of national and regional ombudsmen, as well as that of the European Ombudsman, more relevant at the EU level, thus strengthening the position of ombudsman offices throughout Europe.

Ombudsman Daily News

The most widely read section of the Extranet remains the "News" section, with articles accessed almost 4 000 times last month and over 100 unique users (ombudsmen and liaison officers) reading its contents every month, on average. But the readership of the Daily News could be much higher if (i) users only received notifications of articles in languages they understand, (ii) the content of the Daily News could be tailored to the countries and regions that the user is interested in, and (iii) the general public had access to the Daily News. In order for this to be possible, the Daily News will need to be fully automated.

I therefore propose:

- To encourage Network members to add a simple RSS script to their websites in order to enable the syndication of their news content;
- To fully automate the Daily News to display the news received through the RSS feeds, in all available languages;
- To only publish in Daily News, after a short transition period, the news received through RSS feeds;
- To enable Daily News subscribers to choose in which languages they would like to receive



news and from which countries and regions;

- To make the "News" section of the Extranet public and to allow the general public to subscribe to automatically receive Daily News;
- To create a Twitter account for the Network and to tweet the Daily News headlines through it, as well as other information about the Network's activities.

In this way, the relevance of Daily News will be guaranteed for each individual user, based on their own preferences, the impact will be much higher, by enabling users to receive information in a wider range of languages if they wish, and the visibility of the Network will be greatly increased, with the public becoming more informed of the activities of the Network through the Extranet and through social media.

Queries about EU law

Since the Network was created in 1996, dozens of ombudsman offices have submitted queries to the European Ombudsman about EU law issues arising during the inquiries conducted by their offices. Through the query procedure, in which the European Ombudsman assists Network members by obtaining expert replies from the EU institutions, many national and regional ombudsman investigations have been resolved in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. But for a Network comprising 100 ombudsman offices and committees on petitions, the number of queries received each year is very low.

I therefore propose:

- To revamp the "Queries" section of the Extranet in order (i) to make it easier for ombudsmen and committees on petitions to submit a query through use of an online form, (ii) to provide a thematic database of queries received and replies given, and (iii) to increase the rapidity with which queries are handled and resolved;
- That the "Queries" section of the Extranet remain accessible only to Network members, in order to maximise the possibility for sharing information that might not be in the public domain;
- To produce an information brochure, for annual distribution to Network members, outlining the query procedure, providing examples of how it has helped Ombudsman offices in their work, and explaining how to submit a query.

By making the query procedure more visible to the Network's members and by providing more information on the positive impact that the query procedure has had for the offices that have used it, the relevance of the procedure for ombudsmen and committees on petitions can be greatly increased.



Parallel investigations

The excellent collaboration between Network members and the European Ombudsman greatly enhanced my own-initiative inquiry regarding Frontex Joint Return Operations. Parallel investigations conducted by several national ombudsman offices and the European Ombudsman on this subject have shown the great potential for enhanced co-operation between Network members on issues of EU law and policy. This is the first time that such co-operation has been achieved through the Network, but demonstrates the potential that exists for further such investigations.

I therefore propose:

- To develop a mechanism for identifying other potential topics for parallel investigations, in co-operation with the Network;
- To ask the head of one of my complaints and inquiries units to take the lead in making proposals for, and co-ordinating, parallel investigations, in close co-operation with my Communication Unit and Own-Initiative Inquiries Co-ordinator;
- To regularly invite all members of the Network to suggest possible topics for parallel investigations;
- To increase the impact of the parallel investigations by aligning, as far as possible, the opening and closing of parallel investigations and the reporting of their outcomes.

The parallel investigations have the potential greatly to increase the relevance of the work of the Network and to increase the visibility of the Network's activities. In order to be successful, the topics to be investigated will have to be carefully chosen.

EU law digest

The direct relevance of EU law and policy to the work of ombudsmen and committees on petitions throughout Europe is the main reason that the European Network of Ombudsmen was created. But the sharing of information about EU law with members of the Network has not been systematic enough to properly serve the needs of the Network. Seminars, Newsletter articles, and discussions in the Extranet forum have helped to spread knowledge, but not in a sufficiently structured and co-ordinated way.

I therefore propose:

- To create an EU law digest, focused on the needs of the Network's members, to provide information about (i) relevant developments in EU law, (ii) cases handled by the European Ombudsman, and (iii) cases handled by other members of the Network;



- To ask my Director to collaborate with case-handlers throughout my institution and with my Communication Unit to develop the digest;
- To invite members of the Network to contribute information on EU law cases that they have dealt with for inclusion in the digest.

The EU law digest has the potential greatly to increase the relevance of the Network to its members and to increase the visibility of relevant cases throughout the Network. It will require considerable input to ensure that it best serves the needs of its members, but has the potential to become an invaluable tool for case-handlers.

Open Government Partnership

In recent months, I have been increasingly engaging with the Open Government Partnership, and I'm delighted that several of you have also taken the initiative of getting involved in this important project. The next issue of the Newsletter contains an article on the OGP and why ombudsmen should think about getting involved in this initiative. The documents table at the entrance to this meeting room contains leaflets about the OGP, which I hope you will find of interest. Twenty EU Member States have now signed up and I would encourage ombudsmen in those countries to involve themselves with the OGP processes, as brokers of dialogue between civil society and government, as part of the structures that manage the OGP, or by bringing in concrete "asks" into the Action Plans. In the eight Member States that are not part of the OGP (Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Germany, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia), the national ombudsmen or petitions committees could be an important lever in securing participation. For my part, I will continue to pressure the EU institutions to maximise openness at the EU level.

I hope you will all consider becoming actively involved in the OGP. This topic seems ideally suited to being discussed through an online meeting between our offices. Over the coming months, I will look into the possibility of arranging such a meeting to discuss how we can best work together in advancing the OGP agenda.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to pay tribute to my two predecessors, Jacob Söderman and Nikiforos Diamandouros, for having created and then developed the European Network of Ombudsmen over the last two decades. But as the Network approaches its 20th anniversary in 2016, I feel that the time is right to take it to the next level, (i) by re-focusing its activities on what it was originally created to facilitate – the promotion of knowledge of EU law and policy amongst ombudsmen and committees on petitions throughout Europe, (ii) by finding ways to promote greater co-operation between its members, and (iii) by transforming the visibility of the Network to a range of key stakeholders, including governments and administrations at the EU, national, and regional levels, the media throughout Europe, potential complainants, and the general public.



I very much hope that my proposals accurately reflect your wishes for the Network, as stated in your replies to last year's questionnaire, as clarified in the invaluable feedback received from your liaison officers, and as developed in the discussions I have had with many of you since taking office as European Ombudsman.

Thank you for your attention!