

Address to European Parliament on Annual Report 2016

Speech - **City** Strasbourg - **Country** France - **Date** 15/11/2017

Thank you President,

Good evening, and thank you Madame Mizzi and all of the shadow rapporteurs for your work on this report and thank you once again for your strong support.

Honourable Members, this is my fourth time addressing you in plenary. We draw inspiration from your work as you reflect the concerns of the citizens you represent and it is my role to try to deal also with similar concerns of citizens.

Mr. /Madame President, I very much welcome also the presence again of Vice President Timmermans to this debate and I thank him for his support for my work.

As you know, a majority of the complaints that we receive are directed at the Commission given its role and its high level of interaction with citizens. The Commission continues to engage positively with my office and while no relationship is ever perfect we both do our best to deal with challenging issues.

This report shows that increasing attention is being paid by my office to the Council. Rising public awareness of its role of and greater demands for transparency have prompted this additional scrutiny and perhaps in future years Parliament might consider inviting a Council representative also to attend this very valuable annual hearing.

Today's draft report expresses support for my strategic inquiry into the transparency of the Council's working parties and COREPER committees and a positive outcome would help, I hope, to dispel the perception that EU institutions are not transparent and, therefore not sufficiently accountable.

Citizens are not always aware that the Council is not just a so-called 'Brussels institution'. As French President Macron said recently, "Brussels is us". Greater Council transparency, I believe, will lessen the temptation to blame 'Brussels' for decisions taken by member state Ministers and Governments as citizens will see precisely where responsibility lies.

I fully appreciate how hard it can be to get consensus or a majority vote on some matters but



when Parliament and the Commission are clear on where they stand, it can be frustrating to citizens when the failure of the Council to reach a common approach or even take a vote which means that some proposals remain stalled sometimes indefinitely.

It is for example now over a year since the Commission made its proposal for an improved Transparency Register, and the Parliament agreed its negotiation mandate earlier this year.

However the Council is now delayed in agreeing its mandate to enter talks. I welcome the efforts of the Estonian Presidency to unblock the impasse and I very much hope that agreement can be reached before the elections in 2019.

Transparency in itself cannot deal with every Union problem but it can throw light not just on the respective responsibilities of the EU institutions but also dispel some of the false facts and fake news that increasingly impact on the way in which the EU is mediated and I note and welcome Vice President Timmerman's announcement this week of a public consultation on this matter.

Fake News is ultimately about influencing – with a view to undermining – the democratic process. Lobbying transparency can help to reassure citizens that when it comes to the influencing of the EU institutions, measures are in place to help to mitigate its more negative impacts.

Other transparency work in 2016 included an exchange with Eurogroup President Dijsselbloem encouraging moves to open up the work of that very important group. Obviously, as the Eurogroup is not officially an EU institution, my mandate is limited but I did welcome the President's initiative in attempting to further the transparency of its decision making.

Many citizens were concerned about what they perceived as the lack of accountability of the Troika and similar concerns are at times expressed about the Eurogroup and indeed about the Council. Greater accountability through transparency is an obvious way to help to rectify this citizen alienation.

I continue to raise awareness among my colleagues in the European Network of Ombudsmen important EU issues.

Last June, I hosted our annual Network conference in Brussels at which we discussed open government, populism in Europe and of course Brexit. I wish to thank Vice President Timmermans for his keynote speech. It meant a lot to colleagues from all of your member states to be able to have that direct engagement and I have rarely heard such lively post seminar conversation. I would also like to thank Madame Cecilia Wikström and other MEPs for their support for these events and their much appreciated contributions to them.

This report today also recognizes the work of my Office in several other areas.

These include:

- transparency of the Brexit talks;



- continued work with the ECB and the EIB;
- an ongoing inquiry vis a vis the Commissioners' Code of Conduct improvements to which the Commission has proposed;
- a new Ombudsman guide for EU officials on dealing with lobbyists;
- our work on the EU whistleblowing rules to protect EU staff;
- an inquiry into the Commission EU Pilot for infringement;
- the ongoing work with the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities;
- and the European Citizens Initiative, which the Commission is now revising;

Let me also mention some routine cases dealt with in 2016.

1. A complaint from a Polish research institute which undertook three EU co-financed projects. The institute turned to us after the Commission decided to recover some costs related to the subcontracting of the work. However following our inquiry, and a document inspection, the Commission agreed to waive the recovery of around €86,000.

2. A Spanish citizen complained about the lack of translation of Commission public consultations. The Commission agreed that public consultations related to their Work Programme priorities will be in future in all EU languages.

3. In 2015, the Chemicals Agency agreed to our proposal to require those seeking to register chemicals to show that they have tried to avoid animal testing.

These are just three of the over 1,800 complaints we dealt with in 2016. We have also been revising our internal working procedures and working methods and I wish to thank both the Budget and Budget Control Committees for recognition of this work. We will soon be launching a Fast-Track Procedure for dealing with access to documents complaints, so that we can get answers for citizens within weeks instead of months or even in some cases, years.

Next year we do plan to request a moderate budget increase to hire extra multi-lingual staff. This is due to the fact that we are experiencing, this year, a sizeable increase in complaints. We believe we have implemented large efficiency reforms internally, and now need that extra capacity to really improve again our service to citizens.

Honourable Members, finally, I wish to note again the high standards of the EU civil service.

Indeed, to recognise that work and to share best practice across the institutions, we launched in 2016 the Ombudsman Award for Good Administration receiving over 90 nominations.

The awards ceremony was particularly memorable and I was struck by the great pride of the officials in their work and their joy in having it recognised at a time when so much of what they do is either unseen or criticised.

Thank you again to the rapporteur, the shadow rapporteurs, their staff and the secretariats for all the work on this year's report. And thank you to the members of parliament who, through



your active engagement with the office, help make our positive work more effective.

Thank you President.