



25 Years of the European Ombudsman

Strengthening the role of the European Ombudsman
in challenging times for citizens

26 October 2020

Thank you Shada.

Good morning everyone from Strasbourg and a very big thank you to all of you who have joined us from the four corners of Europe to help us to celebrate a big day in the life of the European Ombudsman.

The 25th anniversary is a time to celebrate but more importantly a time to reflect on the past and use the lessons learned to chart a course for the next big milestone and I look forward to your ideas and thoughts on what that course might look like.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the role played in the development of the office by my predecessors Mr Soderman and Professor Diamandouros. Both men brought their own unique approach to the work and left strong foundations on which I and my colleagues have continued to build.

I also want to acknowledge the role played by the European Parliament in the success of the office and particularly by the Petitions Committee and we are honoured to have the present chair of that Committee, **Madame Montserrat** joining us today. From the very start of my first mandate I have stressed the critical importance

of that Ombudsman Parliament link and its strength has been the cornerstone of this office's success over the last 25 years.

Collaboration with the European Network of Ombudsman has also been a valuable part of the work, and today's event is also our annual conference. In recent years this annual conference has been held in Brussels, and today for the first time it is 100% digital. As Irish Ombudsman for ten years, and now as European Ombudsman for the last seven years, I have always appreciated the friendship and solidarity. And I have been pleased to build on that solidarity through the initiation of joint investigations between my office and those of the national and regional offices, a practice that I hope to build on in the years ahead. I am therefore very pleased to also have the current president of the International Ombudsman Institute Mr Peter Tyndall joining us today.

Another key actor in the success of the office has been civil society. Unlike national and regional Ombudsmen, our links to citizens are not always as direct and the complaints we deal do not always stem from their everyday concerns such as social welfare, health and housing. But civil society has provided that vital bridge often bringing issues to our attention that, when resolved, can and do have positive impacts for EU citizens.

We bring different perspectives at times but I believe we share the joint ambition of making the administration more responsive to citizens needs and encouraging it to be as open and transparent as possible when doing so. Again, I am very pleased to have two of the leaders of EU civil society – Michiel van Hulten of Transparency International and Professor Alberto Alemanno from the HEC Paris – in attendance today.

But an office is successful not because of the work of one person but of many and I am proud to lead an office of engaged and committed public servants who have so ably supported my work and that of my

predecessors. They bring expertise and insight without which the office could not operate as effectively as it does. All of this is underpinned by their own professional and personal commitment to the highest values of the Union. I thank them all for their work and for their support.

Our discussion this morning is intended to focus on the future of this Office and as I look to the next four years of my mandate this is for me a vital discussion.

When I came into office in 2013 I had a very clear strategy. I won't call it ambitious because in my mind I intended to do only what an engaged and committed European Ombudsman should do and that is quite simply to comply with what the Treaties and Charter of Fundamental Rights compels it to do – to make sure that EU citizens are treated fairly by the EU administration and that the rights of good administration and openness are respected.

If I was ambitious, it was in my intention not to sit back and wait passively for complaints to arrive at my door. Much of the EU administration is distant geographically and psychologically for EU citizens and this small office is no exception. To maximise its potential, to give real life to its intended role, I needed to be proactive in that task. To that end, I knew that the power of own initiative investigation, granted by the treaties, was critical and to date the intensification of own initiative strategic inquiries by this office has played a very significant role in increasing its visibility, relevance and impact.

It has brought wider attention to our work, led to a big increase in the number of complaints of significant wider public interest, and also helped to solve systemic issues that had failed to be resolved for many years.

Parallel to that work, we moved to improve our complaint handling processes, making them more efficient and in the crucial area of access to documents, introduced a Fast Track procedure to get cases finalized as quickly as possible. As a result, the service we provide to individual complainants has been improved and I intend to make further improvements over the next four years.

When I look back at the strategic work in particular over the last seven years, I see that if there is a common theme it relates to the accountability of the EU's decision-making process. Many EU leaders lament the sometimes weak links between the EU institutions and the people yet fail to see that this problem is compounded by a lack of openness about what they are doing. They are asking people in effect blindly to trust them, asking for acceptance of laws and measures that have been agreed at time often without their input, despite the citizens' Treaty right to participate in the democratic life of the Union.

Our work has therefore included the transparency of the so-called trilogue negotiations between Commission, Parliament and Council on draft EU laws, transparency of the legislative process in the Council itself and the transparency of the Eurogroup, the way in which the interests of expert groups that advise the Commission are balanced and managed, the challenging issue of 'revolving doors' when staff move between the institutions and the private sector, the transparency of institutional lobbying, the transparency of EU trade negotiations, among many others. All of these revolve around the core issues of making sure that EU citizens are made as fully aware as possible of how the laws that affect them are made and who or what is influencing the making of those laws.

This is a process of evolution not revolution but already we have seen some significant changes. The German Presidency has achieved agreement for some positive changes vis a vis council transparency, Commissioners and senior Commission personnel now publish their

lobbying meetings, there is greater public scrutiny of moves between the EU administration and the private sector and trade negotiations now include transparency as a key principle - at least on the EU side.

So, as we reach this 25 year punctuation point, with a lot achieved but a lot left to do, I look forward to your thoughts on our future. Like every other office we face the challenges of making our work visible to the citizens who need us, of encouraging the administration to accept our recommendations even if they don't like them but have nonetheless been well founded on fact and with cogent analysis.

Increasingly we live in age where independent oversight is either being downgraded or ignored and citizens cannot know who to trust or believe. How do I and my colleagues steer this small office in the direction of greater positive impact? At the moment, the legislators are actually negotiating over a revision of our statute, the legal basis of our office. And so now is the time to ask is there a need even for the office to be reimagined in some way, having proved itself over the last 25 years. If this office were being created in the year 2021, what would and should it look like?

The first person to address these issues this morning is someone I met as European Ombudsman back in 2013 just a few weeks after I took office, when he was Vice President of the European Commission, and today, he is still Vice President of the European Commission charged with the important portfolio of interinstitutional relations and foresight. The latter responsibility is particularly relevant to our discussions today.

I am honoured to introduce him to you as our keynote speaker, Mr. **Maroš Šefčovič**....