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Ombudsman: European Union citizenship is in crisis

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The European Ombudsman investigates complaints about maladministration in the EU institutions and bodies. Any EU citizen, resident, or an enterprise or association in a Member State, can lodge a complaint with the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman offers a fast, flexible and free means of solving problems with the EU administration.

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The European Ombudsman, Emily O'Reilly, has warned that the key objective of EU citizenship, namely for people to feel a stronger attachment to the EU, is not succeeding. At the closing conference of the "European Year of Citizens 2013" in Vilnius, Lithuania, she called on policy makers and civil society not only to focus on the economic, but also on the EU's identity and legitimacy crisis.

She stated: "We need to keep in mind those values and principles on which the EU was founded, not just the economic ones but also, and more importantly, respect for fundamental rights, the notion of freedom, solidarity, the protection of minorities and respect for cultural and language diversity. We need a 'human Europe'".

Challenge citizens to look beyond their personal and national interests

According to Emily O'Reilly, the elections of the European Parliament (EP) in 2014 will be a real opportunity for citizens to make their voices heard at the EU level. Millions of voters will elect their representatives in the EP and, through them, help determine the outcome of the election of the next Commission President. She stressed that the new office holders need to be courageous enough to challenge EU citizens to look beyond their personal and national interests.

EU institutions should not be seen as arrogant and self-serving

Emily O'Reilly also called on the EU institutions to become more transparent and accountable in order not to be perceived as remote and distant to people's concerns. She warned that the EU institutions should do more to counter the suspicion that some senior officials are far too close to certain business interests. With a view to the upcoming changes in the EP and the Commission, she voiced her concern that many senior people may leave EU positions and take up lucrative private sector employment without adequate scrutiny of possible conflicts of interest.

O'Reilly stated: "Our EU institutions must behave impeccably and be seen to resist the temptation towards arrogance and self-serving behaviour. Given the perceived lack of political legitimacy, the EU itself must be seen to be the 'gold standard' in these areas."

The Ombudsman's full speech for the EYC event is available at:

<http://www.ombudsman.europa.eu/en/activities/speech.faces/en/52763/html.bookmark>