Activities of the European Ombudsman - annual report 2019

2020/2125(INI) - 11/03/2021 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 576 votes to 11, with 108 abstentions, a resolution on the activities of the European Ombudsman - annual report 2019.

The Ombudsman's activities in 2019

Members recalled that 19 619 citizens sought the services of the Ombudsman for help in 2019 and that 16 045 of them were advised via the interactive guide on the Ombudsman's website. In 2019, the Ombudsman registered 2201 complaints and received 1373 requests for information; of the 2 201 complaints, the Ombudsman provided advice to the complainant or passed the matter on in 862 cases.

The Ombudsman opened 458 inquiries and closed 560 inquiries. Most of the inquiries concerned the Commission, followed by the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO), whose number of inquiries against it has risen sharply since 2018.

The investigations closed concerned, *inter alia*, (i) requests for information and access to documents, (ii) service culture, e.g. kindness towards citizens, (iii) languages and respect for deadlines, (iv) appropriate use of discretion, including in infringement proceedings, (v) respect for procedural rights, including the right to be heard, (vi) proper management of administrative and personnel matters, (vii) recruitment and (viii) respect for fundamental rights. The average time needed to complete an investigation was less than seven months.

The Ombudsman also launched nine strategic initiatives, including on the effectiveness of Member States' mechanisms for handling complaints relating to the Structural Funds, the transparency of the Brexit negotiations, the transparency of lobbying and the EU Transparency Register, the EU procedure for assessing food risks, and the transparency of meetings between the President of the European Council and interest representatives.

Transparency and ethics

Members expressed satisfaction with its fruitful relationship with the European Ombudsman, a key and indispensable partner of the European Parliament. They approved her commitment to continuing her efforts to ‘ensure that the EU delivers the highest standards of administration, transparency and ethics’, and to guaranteeing the accessibility and quality of the services that the EU provides to EU citizens.

The resolution stressed the need for the EU institutions to maintain the maximum level of transparency and objectivity, so that citizens can follow and take an active part in the decision-making process to strengthen their trust in and feeling of proximity to the institutions, while guaranteeing access to all relevant information so that they can fully exercise their democratic rights and ensuring a genuine capacity to hold the institutions to account.

Parliament called for full publication of contracts signed with pharmaceutical companies, including documents relating to negotiations with them, for the development, manufacture, purchase and deployment of COVID-19 vaccines, as well as full transparency on all clinical trial results related to these vaccines.

The Ombudsman is invited to continue to promote greater transparency in legislative discussions in the preparatory bodies of the Council of the European Union, both as regards public access to its legislative documents and its decision-making process. The practice of Member States holding the Presidency of the Council of accepting corporate sponsorship should also be prevented.

Members noted that, following the Ombudsman's recommendations, the Commission and the Council had maintained a high level of transparency in the legislative process throughout the negotiations on EU-UK relations and urged them to maintain this requirement when defining the new free trade agreement.

While welcoming the Ombudsman's efforts to combat conflicts of interest, Members highlighted the need for the adoption of a fair and ambitious legal act on the Transparency Register in order to make it fully mandatory and legally binding for all EU institutions and agencies and to create obligations for third parties and interest representatives, thereby ensuring the full transparency of lobbying.

Parliament called on the Commission to take a more robust approach to the issue of ‘revolving doors’ and to follow through with the proposed measures, including forbidding new activity when there is evidence that this activity would lead to a conflict with the public interest and publishing, directly on its ethics website and in a timely manner, all related information on each case of former senior staff members assessed with a view to implementing the one-year lobbying and advocacy ban.

Members endorsed the European Ombudsman’s confirmation of her finding that four instances of maladministration marred the appointment process of the most senior Commission official. They welcomed the new Commission’s introduction in 2019 of a specific appointment procedure for its Secretary-General.

Disability

Members welcomed the European Ombudsman's role in protecting, promoting and monitoring the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) by the EU administration, and in strengthening the EU agenda for the rights of persons with disabilities. They invited the Commission to propose a comprehensive, ambitious and long-term EU disability strategy for the post-2020 period.

Complaints

Parliament called on the Ombudsman to remain vigilant in handling complaints concerning fundamental rights, including equality, non-discrimination and the right to be heard. It endorsed her decision to reply to all those seeking assistance in the language of their complaint. It welcomed the redesign of the Ombudsman's website, making it a more accessible and functional instrument for EU citizens, and encouraged the Ombudsman to further develop the translation of publications into the different EU languages.

Lastly, Members called on the European Parliament to overhaul the nomination process for the election of the European Ombudsman so that the election at the beginning of the parliamentary term can take place in a more informed, uniform and orderly manner.