Activities of the European Ombudsman - annual report 2020

2021/2167(INI) - 16/02/2022 - Text adopted by Parliament, single reading

The European Parliament adopted by 385 votes to 217, with 88 abstentions, a resolution on the Annual Report on the activities of the European Ombudsman in 2020.

Parliament approved the Annual Report 2020 and welcomed the Ombudsman's work to strengthen the openness, accountability and integrity of the Union's institutions, bodies, offices and agencies, protecting the fundamental rights of citizens, especially in a year marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. It expressed its appreciation to the Ombudsman for her constructive cooperation with the Parliament, in particular the Petitions Committee, and with the other EU institutions.

Emergency procurement and vaccine contracts

Parliament welcomed the Ombudsman's question to the Commission about the transparency of the scientific advice it receives, its meetings with interest representatives and its decisions on emergency procurement. Deploring the Commission's failure to provide satisfactory explanations to the Ombudsman's inquiries about key elements of its work during the COVID-19 crisis, Members called on the Commission to **clarify its decision-making process** on emergency procurement.

Stressing that trust between citizens and institutions is of paramount importance, especially in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, Parliament encouraged the Ombudsman to continue her inquiries. It called on the Commission to ensure full transparency of all details concerning COVID-19 vaccine research, development, procurement and distribution, by publishing **non-redacted versions of advance purchase agreements and purchase agreements**, and by making disclosure of all details to be included in future contracts a precondition for the opening of future negotiations with pharmaceutical companies.

Plans for recovery and resilience

Parliament welcomed the Ombudsman's action on requests to the Commission to make **publicly available** documents relating to Member States' recovery and resilience plans, in which there is strong public interest and which relate to the unprecedented amount of money to be allocated under NextGenerationEU.

The resolution stressed that **increased transparency** and monitoring by the competent authorities is needed in this respect, including enhanced oversight by the Ombudsman of administrative procedures relating to EU funds.

Access to documents

Deploring the fact that the Council continues to prevent citizens from having direct and prompt access to its legislative documents throughout the legislative process, Parliament commended the Ombudsman for her determination to achieve **full transparency in the Union's decision-making process**. It called on the Council to redouble its efforts on transparency, in particular by recording and publishing Member States' positions and making more trialogue documents available, in order to assert citizens' democratic rights.

Parliament welcomed the Ombudsman's work to protect the right of EU citizens to have access to documents held by the EU institutions and to make documents available to citizens in all official EU languages. It welcomed the Ombudsman's initiative for a fast-track procedure for cases concerning access to documents, the aim of which is to obtain a decision on the documents requested within 40 working days.

Approval of active substances

The Ombudsman raised concerns about the Commission's current practices regarding the approval of 'active substances' used in pesticides. Parliament called on the Commission to refrain from approving 'active substances' used in pesticides if there are serious doubts and if no safe use has been identified. It asked the Commission to ensure that a procedure for approving 'active substances' in pesticides is put in place and that it is fully transparent and free of conflicts of interest.

Protection of fundamental rights

Parliament welcomed the Ombudsman's investigations into the protection of **refugees' fundamental rights**, including her inquiry into how the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex) handles breaches of fundamental rights and the extension of its mandate, the transparency and effectiveness of the complaint mechanism and the role and the independence of the Fundamental Rights Officer. It called on the Ombudsman to follow this up.

Members also welcomed the Ombudsman's investigations into complaints from **people with disabilities** and encouraged her work as an active participant in the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD).

Other issues

Parliament criticised the decision by the Member States holding the Council presidency to use **corporate sponsorship**, as this poses serious risks to the reputation of the EU's image, stressing that it is essential to reject all sponsorship in the future.

Members also approved the Ombudsman's repeated commitment to combating **revolving door cases**, calling on the Ombudsman to continue her work to ensure the timely publication of the names of all EU officials involved in revolving door cases and to guarantee full transparency on all related information.

Congratulating the Ombudsman on the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the post, Parliament recalled that since 1995, the European Ombudsman's office has dealt with more than 57 000 complaints and conducted over 7 300 inquiries. It endorsed the Ombudsman's strategy 'Towards 2024' aimed at increasing the impact, visibility and relevance of the Ombudsman's Office.

Lastly, Members welcomed the Ombudsman's practical recommendations to the EU administration on the use of the 24 official languages to communicate with the public. These recommendations are essential to protect Europe's rich linguistic diversity.