Introductory statement by Mr. Jo?o Sant'Anna for the conference "Europe 2020 - the Civic Visions"

Published at: 02-02-2010
Source: Portal Europe



Mr. Joro Sant'Anna, Head of the European Ombudsman's Legal Department, was special guest of the conference "Europe 2020 - the Civic Visions", 29-30 January 2010, Sofia, Bulgaria.

This is his introductory speech at the conference opening.

On behalf of the European Ombudsman, I would like to congratulate the European Institute Foundation for organising this conference. The European Ombudsman Mr Nikiforos Diamandouros, who has just been re-elected by the European Parliament for a new mandate, fully supports your efforts to encourage citizen engagement and empowerment in the European Union, which are concepts that are central to his work as European Ombudsman.

This is indeed the right moment to organise such a conference, looking to the future, to a vision for the year 2020. With the Treaty of Lisbon having just entered into force, the time is now ripe for such an initiative.

Significant efforts have been made during the last decades to strengthen citizens' rights and to make a reality of a "Citizens' Europe". The Maastricht Treaty established the concept of citizenship of the European Union. Of particular importance in terms of European citizenship rights is the right to move and reside freely within the territory of the Member States. The Maastricht Treaty also introduced the right to complain to the Ombudsman about maladministration in the EU institutions.

The office of the European Ombudsman was established with the specific purpose of helping to bring the European Union closer to its citizens and to give the EU administration a "human face". Citizens, companies, lawyers, associations, NGOs and interest groups have the right to complain about maladministration in the European institutions. The Ombudsman's inquiries concern issues such as lack of transparency, contractual disputes in the framework of EU projects, procedural errors or discrimination.

The entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty and of a legally binding Charter of Fundamental Rights marks a real step forward in terms of a Citizens' Europe. The Treaty is good for the Union and for its citizens. Not least, it enhances the role of both the European Parliament and national Parliaments, a development that can only serve to strengthen the Union's democratic credentials.

Copyrights © 2003-2007 Europe.bg

As I will develop latter in the panel discussions, the entry into force of the Lisbon Treaty introduces important modifications as regards the relationship between the Union institutions and citizens. The Union has set for itself the goal of "enhancing further the democratic and efficient functioning of the institutions". This is in turn reflected in the inclusion of an entirely new Title II in the Treaty on the European Union laying down "Provisions on Democratic Principles".

The Treaty also provides for a stronger voice for European citizens. Thanks to the "Citizens' Initiative", one million citizens from a number of Member States will have the possibility to call on the Commission to bring forward new policy proposals. A public consultation on this issue is currently ongoing and the Ombudsman will intervene in this consultation.

Furthermore, the Treaty provides for greater openness and transparency. The Council shall meet in public, and all EU institutions, bodies, offices and agencies shall conduct their work as openly as possible.

One section of the Charter of Fundamental Rights is entitled ‘Citizens’ Rights’. It contains, of course, the right to complain to the Ombudsman. It also contains the right to good administration, a right which is at the heart of what the European Ombudsman does. This right includes:

• the right to have one’s affairs handled "impartially, fairly and within a reasonable time by the institutions, bodies, offices and agencies of the Union";
• the right of every person to be heard;
• the right of every person to have access to his or her file;
• the right to have the Union make good any damage caused by its institutions or by its servants in the performance of their duties;
• the right to write to the institutions of the Union in one of the Treaty languages and to be provided with an answer in the same language.

Any discussion of citizens' rights also requires a focus on remedies, for when things go wrong. The first and most obvious candidate to resolve problems are the national, regional or local administrations responsible for putting citizens' EU law rights into practice. Where possible, the administrations themselves should put things right.

If the problem is not resolved at this stage, networks such as SOLVIT, putting national administrations in contact with each other to solve citizen's problems in relation to the functioning of the internal market, are vital. What many citizens do not sufficiently know is that they can also turn to a national or regional ombudsman if they have problems exercising their rights under EU law.

The European Ombudsman co-operates closely with his Ombudsmen colleagues in the Member States to help individuals find the right body to address when they have a problem. The European Ombudsman launched an interactive guide on his website, which has proved extremely useful in helping to direct people to the right complaint-handling body. So far, over 29 000 people received advice through the guide. It is available in all 23 EU languages, including Bulgarian and I encourage you to consult it.

Copyrights © 2003-2007 Europe.bg

The European Ombudsman is committed to ensuring that citizen’ rights and interests are at the forefront of developments in the Union, not just in rhetoric but in reality. The Ombudsman remains deeply convinced that success in this difficult task is possible only when all levels work together, that is, European, national, regional and local. It is crucial that these levels collaborate and co-ordinate effectively and direct their efforts towards the common goal of better service for the European citizens and the creation of a real "Citizens' Europe".

May I wish us a good and fruitful discussion during this conference on how to foster and to implement fully the potential positive developments for citizens and for democracy in the EU, which were opened by the entry into force of the Treaty of Lisbon and of a binding Charter of Fundamental Rights.

Thank you very much.

Copyrights © 2003-2007 Europe.bg