

EU still has a “good story” to tell says European Ombudsman

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News

But, warns Emily O'Reilly, EU's “drier” rhetoric is being drowned out by ‘easier to understand’ populist messages.



Emily O'Reilly | Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual

Speaking just ahead of the European elections, O'Reilly said that “Nigel Farage-type” commentaries were more widely read than the “drier, more complex rhetoric” disseminated by the EU.

With less than a fortnight before what has been described as the most important European elections in history, she said, “The EU continues to have a good story to tell but this is currently being overwhelmed by other stories that are also being told.”

She said the messages coming from Eurosceptics like Farage, leader of the of the new Brexit Party in the UK, were “easier to understand” and had “much greater access” to the mainstream media than information and news coming from the EU.

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The Irish-born official also admitted that the furore last year over the appointment of Martin Selmayr as secretary general of the European commission had had a diverse impact on the image of the EU.

O’Reilly strongly criticised Selmayr’s appointment to the commission’s top civil service job but her recommendations were controversially rejected by the executive.

Even so, she stood by her criticism of the way the appointment was dealt with, saying, “The commission did not support my recommendations, but the facts speak for themselves.”

She said, “It is hard to know how much significance a single incident can have but, yes, I think that there was an impact in this case.

“The case was widely publicised in the mainstream press, particularly the populist media and provided strong support to those Eurosceptics and others who are outright hostile to the EU.”

The case, she noted, was one of the “more challenging” she had handled in the past year and was an example of the effect a “lapse of standards” might have on the public’s perception of the EU and its institutions.

“I liken the ombudsman to a canary in a mine: to warn when things are going wrong”

She also told reporters, at a news briefing on her annual report, that despite the commission’s refusal to adopt her recommendations in the Selmayr case she did not think the ombudsman needed stronger or tougher powers.

“The statute of the office is currently being changed but, generally, I am happy with how things are going,” she said.

“I liken the ombudsman to a canary in a mine: to warn when things are going wrong.”

In her annual report for 2018, she also voiced concerns about transparency in the EU administration which accounted for around a quarter of her cases in the past year.

The year also saw the number of complaints rise again, up 17 per cent, marking, she believes, citizens' increased awareness of the office.

In 2018, the ombudsman issued a special report to the European Parliament asking it to support her proposals on improving transparency in the European Council which, she said, some had branded a “black box.”

On this, she made two recommendations, including that national government positions are recorded.

“It is hard to know how much significance a single incident (the appointment of Martin Selmayr as secretary general of the European commission) can have but, yes, I think that there was an impact in this case”

She said she hoped the Finnish presidency of the EU in the second half of this year would “push” for more transparency in the way the council operates.

Another area highlighted at the briefing was the so-called revolving door of senior commission staff which has seen several top officials move directly to private sector jobs after leaving the executive, leaving themselves open to accusations of a possible conflict of interest.

O’Reilly believes that, in the future, a “legal option” should be considered to forbid new jobs in such cases.

She said a more “robust approach” was needed to ensure this did not happen, adding, “The rules are ok, but the problem is with the implementation of these rules.”

Her report says she handled 2,180 cases last year and opened 490 inquiries. The highest number of complaints came from Spain (393) which, she said, was probably because of the “high visibility” of the ombudsman in Spain and a network of regional ombudsmen and women in the country.

The highest number of inquiries came from Belgium (87), likely due, she said, to the fact that the EU institutions are based in the city.

She said there had been few complaints related to the #MeToo campaign, adding, “This is a pity but reflects the fact that complaints about sexual harassment are very personal and not the standard administrative complaint.”

O’Reilly also said she would seek another term in office when the parliament petitions committee decides on this later in the year.

About the author

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