

The Ombudsman: bridging the divide

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Opinion

Europe's citizens are drifting away from the EU and what it should represent; a strong Ombudsman with the right experience can bring both sides back together, writes Nils Muižnieks.



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Thirty years ago, the fall of the Berlin Wall saw the birth of a new era of freedom and democracy. European integration gained momentum, bringing with it the promise of a brighter future for millions of Europeans.

Today, that enthusiasm has begun to fade. European institutions are perceived as distant, unresponsive to citizens and lacking transparency in their decision-making.

We need a Europe that works better for its citizens. I come from Latvia, a small country that became a member of the EU following decades of Soviet rule. The Soviet Union is remembered for its repression, inefficiency, fake equality and international isolation.

The EU, on the other hand, promised freedom, prosperity, good governance, security, peace and international cooperation.

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I want to help it fulfil that promise. My parents had to flee their homeland, become refugees and rebuild their lives on the other side of the Atlantic.

They endured hardship to enjoy the rights and freedoms that my daughters, born in the same homeland fifty years later, now take for granted.

A few years ago, people in Ukraine toppled a government for those same freedoms and are still paying dearly for having dared to embrace EU values.

In the six years I served as Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, I met with women and young girls in shelters.

"The role of the EU Ombudsman is crucial here; it can be the conscience of the EU and the ally of citizens to help build an EU for all"

I advocated for the protection of pensioners, families and workers hit by the economic crisis and austerity measures.

I gave a voice to persons with disabilities excluded at the margins of society. I stood up for journalists and human rights defenders.

What I took away from those experiences is that people across the continent look to Europe with a mix of hope and despair.

The EU has to nurture that hope by taking a hard look at itself and addressing the reasons some have come to look at it in despair.

It has to refocus on its values and ideals. The role of the EU Ombudsman is crucial here; it can be the conscience of the EU and the ally of citizens to help build an EU for all.

The Ombudsman has enormous untapped potential to bring European institutions closer to citizens and foster popular participation.

This is the reason why I have decided to run for this post. I want to put my decades-long experience in human rights and democratic institutions, as well as placing my managerial and interpersonal skills, at the service of European citizens.

My vision is for an Ombudsman who fosters accountability. I will partner with the European Parliament to ensure that EU law and resources are applied for the benefit of citizens.

As an Ombudsman, I will focus on access to information and ensuring good administrative practice, not only in Brussels institutions but also in the EU's many agencies, particularly those on the front-line of politically-sensitive policies and those that may be under heavy pressure from lobbying interests.

"My vision is that of an Ombudsman that is close to citizens, bridging the gap between citizens and the EU institutions"

My vision is also that of an Ombudsman who makes fundamental rights part of their DNA. The EU's primary stakeholders are its citizens and they must become more aware of their rights and how to exercise them.

The Ombudsman can help in this regard, through cooperation with the Parliament, with individual MEPs, with the institutions and agencies, with national human rights structures.

In times of digital surveillance, backsliding on well-established human rights - such as freedom of expression, women's rights, and free movement - is not acceptable.

I will be more active in using the Ombudsman's mandate to realise the EU promise of freedom. My vision is that of an Ombudsman that is close to citizens, bridging the gap between citizens and the EU institutions.

I will strengthen cooperation with national human rights structures and civil society. Curiously, some are now claiming only a lawyer or judge can do this job, though both the incumbent and her predecessor are non-lawyers.

The Ombudsman needs to know the law and have access to good legal advice, but also needs experience from outside the 'ivory tower' of a courtroom, good political instincts and the courage to fight for what is right.

I firmly believe that the reason why EU citizens have grown dissatisfied with the European project is because they feel betrayed.

Fortunately, the recent elections to the European Parliament show that this relationship is not completely broken.

There is still hope and trust. As EU Ombudsman, I will work every day to bring the functioning of European institutions in line with that hope.

About the author

Nils Muižnieks is a candidate for European Ombudsman

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