

Honourable Members, Thank you for having given me the opportunity to present my ideas for the position of European Ombudsman (EO) and to convince you that I am the best candidate.

Throughout my life, human rights, dignity and the rule of law have always had a very special meaning for me.

I was born and spent my childhood under the Soviet regime in Estonia, and experienced first-hand what it means to gain freedom and then to join the European Union (EU). When Estonia regained its independence, I was able to study law in Germany and live in France, to learn many languages, and I now have three children who are both Estonian and French.

I am a good example of what the EU brought to the Erasmus generation.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the European Ombudsman is what the Treaty and the Charter of Fundamental Rights say it is: the institution to which citizens have the fundamental right to complain about maladministration in the activities of the EU Institutions, bodies, offices and agencies.

It may also open inquiries on its own initiative that concern maladministration.

The Ombudsman should not inquire into or duplicate the political work of the European Parliament and its Committees. Nor should it duplicate the work of human rights organisations, or that of the Council of Europe's Commissioner for Human Rights who does not handle complaints. Furthermore, the Ombudsman is not a court.

The Ombudsman is there to carry out effective work with real impact for citizens who complain about maladministration and to make the EU administration more effective.

The European Ombudsman has to be independent and impartial and cannot follow political or any other instincts in its work. Otherwise, institutions and complainants will not trust the Ombudsman. Without trust, the Ombudsman's recommendations will not be followed by the administration, and citizens will not submit complaints.

The kind of complaints that the European Ombudsman is required to deal with usually call for a sound knowledge of the law as well as a sense of justice. The European Ombudsman has to find solutions and get them accepted. The Ombudsman must be able to persuade institutions that they should not only comply with the law but they should do so in the most citizen friendly way possible. This is precisely what I will do if you elect me.

I am a lawyer by profession and have been a judge for more than 15 years: I spent 7 years serving as a judge of the Estonian Supreme Court and for the past 9 years, I have served as judge of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. In this respect, I note that the statute of the European Ombudsman provides that senior judges are automatically qualified to become European Ombudsman and no other proof is needed of their competence and experience for the position.

As a judge and human rights judge, I have decided cases on issues ranging from agriculture and environment to terrorism, from freedom of expression to child abduction. I have had to pass judgement on matters of life and death and I have had the

courage to express my dissent in controversial cases. I know citizens' problems inside out.

As a former civil servant in Estonia, an exemplary country for e-administration, I also have experience in humanising the administrative process. I know the administration inside out. Furthermore, I have been a professor of European law and have extensive knowledge of European Union law that is essential for the European Ombudsman. My experience in leadership within international bodies has taught me what it means to take responsibility in an international setting.

Although I believe strongly in the power of democratic politics to promote citizens' interests and welfare, I have never been affiliated to any specific political party.

I stand for this election because I believe in the European Ombudsman's potential for the good of ordinary citizens. I identified the strengths and problems of the European Ombudsman institution today. My goal is to build on its strengths and to solve the problems. Changes at the Ombudsman Office are needed.

I have had extensive discussions with two former European ombudsmen who are a source of inspiration for my candidacy. I have talked to several national ombudsmen, including the secretary general of the International Ombudsman Institute.

According to critics writing in academic journals and information in the media, the core problem is that the EU institutions have lost trust in the EO because the Ombudsman's work is no longer firmly based on law and the Ombudsman does not always apply fair procedure.

As a result, the institutions have become less willing to accept proposed solutions. I could give several examples, but I will just mention one case, concerning MEPs' expenses, in which this house accused the EO of failing to ensure a fair procedure by going public before hearing its position.

If we look at the statistics, we can note that the rate of compliance with EO recommendations has decreased.

The number of complaints to the EO is surprisingly low. Although more than 500 million people live in the EU, there are only about 2000 complaints each year.

Citizens should not lose trust in the EO and the institutions should not lose their respect for the EO.

To restore the Ombudsman's credibility, law should become the foundation of the institution's work once again. What is also required is an Ombudsman whose DNA includes independence and impartiality and who knows by training and experience what fair procedure is all about. As a judge, I have all the qualifications and skills needed. Most of the national ombudsmen are also lawyers, some of them have been judges.

Ladies and gentlemen, my vision for the Office is to provide an excellent service to complainants, combining high-level legal expertise and a human approach, as well as to protect the fundamental rights of citizens.

By using persuasion, legal argumentation and genuine cooperation with the EU administration, solutions will be found that satisfy complainants in a balanced way.

I have a very concrete plan to accomplish my vision, which you will find in my action plan. At this stage, I will just highlight a few elements.

First: No complaint can be set aside, because each complaint is a signal of what may be wrong in our Europe. Each complaint is equally important. In cooperation with national ombudsmen and the Committee on Petitions, I will be attentive to the human rights concerns of the most vulnerable, such as persons with disabilities, children, the elderly, asylum seekers and refugees staying on the EU territory, minorities, victims of violence. I will give prominence to fundamental rights.

Second: I will use the Ombudsman's own-initiative power wisely and effectively for the benefit of citizens. My first own-initiative investigation could concern the use of technology by the EU institutions for the benefit of the people in compliance with their digital rights and ethical principles. Another important subject I would like to tackle in an own-initiative investigation is the participation of persons with disabilities in the Commission's public consultations on legislative proposals.

Third: In this vein, the EO will regularly take part in the Commission's public consultations that have an impact on citizens' rights and in the work on the codification of EU administrative procedure law. The objective will be to build good administration into the design of new activities.

Fourth: The procedures and structure of the Office will be modernised to provide an efficient, effective, transparent and ethical way of dealing with complaints. I will, for instance, set up a public register of documents. To my surprise, this is missing in a body that promotes transparency.

As regards transparency in general, I will of course continue the Office's important work on transparency, carefully examining complaints and cooperating with national ombudsmen on matters requiring broad changes relating to an administrative culture of openness.

Fifth: I will set up permanent channels of cooperation with the Committee on petitions of the EP. I will strengthen the relationship with national ombudsmen and work together with them on different topics, such as whistleblower protection.

Finally, I will be a true leader with empathy for European Ombudsman staff. The Office's effective work having real impact will be visible.

EU citizens need to be assured that the rule of law is complied with, they need to be certain that the principles and values that bind us together are adhered to. We cannot forget that the EU is precisely a community of law and values.

The support I have received from the Members of Parliament from across political parties, whom I have met and with whom I have had truly inspiring discussions during my campaign, convince me that it is NOW time for the European Ombudsman to be a lawyer once again. As at the time when European citizenship and the Office of the European Ombudsman were established.

I will give EU citizens a voice and will put all my knowledge, experience, dedication and vigour at their service. I will be an ombudsman who is a qualified lawyer, but who also has a human face: compassion and empathy. I will be fair, I will respect dignity, humanity and the rule of law.

Julia Laffranque

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