

Speech delivered by the Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Slovenia, Mr Peter Svetina, at the reception, marking 10th anniversary of the High Commissioner for the Protection of Rights, Liberties, and Mediation of Monaco, 23 January 2024 - the role of the ombudsman, challenges and responsibilities

Your Most Serene Highness Prince Albert II,
Dear and esteemed Human Rights Commissioner Mrs Marina Ceysac,
Excellences and other high guests,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great privilege and honour to address this esteemed gathering on the momentous occasion of the 10th anniversary of the High Commissioner for the Protection of Rights, Liberties, and Mediation under the patronage of Your Serene Highness Prince Albert II of Monaco. It is a privilege to be invited as a speaker on this special occasion.

First and foremost, my sincere congratulations go to Madame Commissioner Marina Ceysac, her predecessor Ms Anne Eastwood, and her entire team on reaching this remarkable milestone. A decade of unwavering commitment, dedication, and exemplary service in the field of protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms is truly commendable. You have undoubtedly left a great mark in the hearts and minds of many.

Furthermore, I commend your vision in organising such an event that not only reflects upon the achievements of the past but also lays a strong foundation for a promising future. It is through initiatives like this that we can collectively work towards a brighter, more harmonious global community, fostering understanding and cooperation among nations.

I am convinced we can all agree that as ombudsmen, we face numerous challenges in an ever-changing world. Issues such as technological advancements, environmental concerns, and economic shifts pose unique obstacles to protecting rights and liberties. The Covid pandemic and wars around the world, as well as other conflicts and the climate crisis, add to the complexity. As we celebrate the milestone achieved by the High Commissioner, I'm sure we also recognise that challenges transcend borders and demand international cooperation and solidarity.

Our responsibility goes beyond addressing individual complaints. We must advocate for systemic changes to prevent future injustices. Engaging with vulnerable groups and confronting prejudice and discrimination are essential to fostering an inclusive society.

As guardians and voices for the people, we ensure transparency, accountability, and good governance. Our work is guided by the principles of integrity and objectivity, aiming to protect fundamental rights and strengthen public trust in institutions. And only together we can rebuild a world where everyone's rights are protected, regardless of their background or beliefs, where nobody is left behind.

Unfortunately, together with my colleagues in the IOI, AOM, ENNHRI, and in other international institutions working in the field of human rights, we find that the trust in the institutions is aggravating. That goes the same for the rule of law and its constitutive elements: legality, democracy, and protection of human rights. And since respect for the rule of law is closely connected to respecting human rights, the role of ombudsman institutions is extremely important. Even though we do not all operate in the same geopolitical circumstances and do not face completely comparable challenges, we are still bound by the same values. Our invisible glue are humanity, nobleness, compassion, heartiness, and selflessness. We are tied together by our care for the dignity of our fellow human beings who, due to different circumstances, have their rights trampled on.

When I think about our work, I cannot imagine how we could retain the trust of people turning to us with their problems, if we would not put ethics and morals on a pedestal. If we would not operate with a high degree of integrity and professionalism. People who turn to us for help frequently lament that institutions are moving away from the individual. I agree that this individual is unfortunately often lost in papers, decisions, and orders - becoming a number. Also the legislation is often complicated, unclear and rapidly changing. Consequently, in searching for answers and solutions people get lost. The problem for many is also on-line accessibility, as some among us don't have the means or the knowledge to properly use it.

Thus, I would here like to touch upon the significance of the duty of disclosure, which is closely connected to the principle of good governance or rather good administration, which was in the EU context codified in Article 41 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union as the Right to good administration.

This right or rather principle derives from national legal orders as the general administrative principle, yet on the national level it is seldom written in constitutions or concretised in practice. An interesting fact is that in Slovenia, the country I come from, this principle is especially protected by the Human Rights Ombudsman Act. Its Article 3 stipulates that in his work, the Ombudsman follows the provisions of the constitution and international legal acts on human rights and fundamental freedoms and that in his interventions, he can refer also to the principles of equity and good administration. Its purpose is to provide citizens with the most efficient services and conduct of administration bodies by supporting the realization of human rights and respecting the general interest of the society. But unfortunately the principle of good administration has been among the most frequent violations in Slovenia for several years.

This is also why I believe that it is extremely important that the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union elevates this right to the level of citizens' rights. Such definition concretises the understanding of good administration, which is also relevant for the implementation of the Charter on the national level. It can indirectly contribute to the understanding of this right at the national level.

Therefore, there are many challenges in the field of good administration. The first one is the empowerment of public servants for personal responsibility in their actions for the protection of people's rights. It is only with personal responsibility and by keeping in mind the person on whose destiny we decide that we can strengthen a society that is humanitarian, inclusive, and forgets nobody. Only if each and every one of us realises that their attitude towards work and people significantly influences the life of individuals can we change things for the better.

This is also one of the reasons why, in my engagement in the international space, I strive for as much raising awareness and education on this topic as possible, as well as on the tasks and competences of ombudsmen which are, in some countries more and in others less, comparable. This is also why events like today's are immensely important. Just like the strengthening of the role of the national human rights institutions and the institutions of the Ombudsman is of the utmost importance – their financial independence and operation according to the so-called Paris and Venice Principles. For it is crucial that we have suitable mandate and competence for the consideration of complaints, investigation of human rights violations, and for the monitoring and recommending measures for improvement. Only through strong and independent institutions, we can ensure that no individual is left without the appropriate protection of their rights. Connected we are stronger and solely in cooperation can we ensure that the institutions we ombudspersons lead have the necessary tools to efficiently fulfil their mission.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As we commemorate this milestone in Monaco's dedication to protecting rights and liberties, we must take a moment to once more commend the High Commissioner of Monaco and her team for their relentless efforts and remarkable achievements. Their work serves as an inspiration to ombudsmen worldwide, reinforcing the notion that by standing united, we can effect positive change and create a fairer and more just society.

However, our responsibility is not limited to the development and prosperity of our own countries, but also includes providing assistance and support to those countries still developing and needing our help and support. Our work within the AOM and IOI enables us to share experience, best practices, and knowledge on how to efficiently protect the rights and interests of people. Only with common persistence, collaboration, and mutual support we can achieve positive change that will benefit all of human society.

Together, we can build a world that cherishes justice, embraces diversity, and empowers each person to flourish. Thank you once again for the opportunity to share my thoughts with you on this important occasion, and I wish the High Commissioner continued success in her noble endeavours.

Thank you all.