

HEARING FOR THE OFFICE OF EUROPEAN OMBUDSMAN
Committee on Petitions
Tuesday 3 December 2024

Teresa ANJINHO - Initial Statement

Honourable Members of the European Parliament,

It is an honour and privilege to stand before you today as a **candidate for the position of European Ombudsman**. I want to thank you for the opportunity to address this esteemed committee to share my motivation, vision, and priorities for this vital European institution.

I present myself as a candidate with a deep sense of duty, viewing this hearing as an opportunity to **discuss the role** of the European Ombudsman for the next five years. I am also here to commit myself to this Parliament, the heart of European democracy and a beacon of freedom in a world where our shared values are being profoundly tested. My commitment is clear: to establish a **strong, bilateral relationship with this Parliament**, based on mutual respect and collaboration, while **acting in total independence** both now and throughout the next five years, should I earn your trust.

This hearing is not only a chance to share my vision for the Ombudsman's role within the EU but also an opportunity to incorporate your insights into shaping my potential mandate. I hope our exchanges go beyond political debate to become a meaningful and structured dialogue. By **fostering cooperation and constructive engagement**, I aim to **work closely with the European Parliament to advance our shared goals**, to ensure that our EU Administration adheres to the **highest standards of transparency and ethic**, and **uphold the rights of European citizens**.

The role of the European Ombudsman carries profound responsibility, requiring unwavering commitment to **fairness, integrity, and trust**. These principles are crucial to strengthening the bond between European institutions and their citizens. My background, with over 20 years of experience in **international human rights law, public service, and academia**, has prepared me to uphold these values with dedication and expertise.

While my career has been deeply enriched by academic research, my experience extends well beyond theory. I have confronted the complexities of governance, accountability, and diplomacy in practical settings.

As the **former Deputy Ombudsman of Portugal**, I tackled sensitive issues spanning justice, internal security, education, health, and fundamental rights. **My work focused on protecting citizens from maladministration, ensuring their voices were heard, and grievances addressed with fairness and transparency**.

This citizen-centred approach taught me that the Ombudsman's power, primarily based on law, lies in its ability to champion material justice, transcending legal formalities to restore fairness

and trust. **A complaint is more than an expression of dissatisfaction—it is an act of trust, a belief that institutions can listen, understand, and resolve.** It reminds us of a fundamental truth: **not all that is lawful is fair, and not all that is fair is captured in law.** Recognizing this gap is critical, especially in today’s rapidly changing world where digital transformation demands more agile and responsive administrations.

Citizens are worried with concrete solutions for their concrete problems, being delivered in a timely manner. Today’s world doesn’t understand indecision by unnecessary formalities or bureaucracies; neither accepts unjustified delays. **We must always respect due process rules and essential formal proceedings, but we also must deliver.** It is a matter of trust in the institution, but – in the end – in the European Union as whole.

The European Ombudsman plays a unique and central role in bridging the gap between expectations and reality, fostering trust between citizens and institutions in a constructive, non-adversarial manner.

In my career as a **Member of Parliament** and **Secretary of State for Justice in Portugal**, and more recently as a member of the **Supervisory Committee of the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF)**, I have combined academic rigor with practical leadership to promote institutional integrity, transparency, and accountability. These experiences have deepened my ability to address challenges at the European level.

However, leadership requires more than expertise; it requires a **clear vision and the ability to set priorities.** I have identified **three primary challenges within the European Ombudsman’s mandate** that I believe demand immediate attention.

1. A Communication Gap

Effective communication goes beyond speaking the same language; it requires institutions to listen, understand, and ensure that citizens feel heard. Addressing unconscious biases and fostering a culture of inclusivity is key to transforming attitudes, practices, and policies.

2. A Deficit in Rights Awareness

Rights must be known, understood, and applied to be effective. Without awareness, even the best laws risk becoming irrelevant. Empowering citizens and legal operators with knowledge is essential to bridging this gap.

3. A Crisis of Trust

Trust in institutions, political processes, and society itself is at a critical juncture. Institutions must not only recognize the difference between campaigning for a right and protecting it but also meet citizens’ expectations with integrity and responsiveness.

My vision is to strengthen trust between the EU and its citizens by ensuring the highest standards of **integrity, accountability, and responsiveness.** This will be achieved through **three primary areas of focus:**

1. Empowering Individual Complaints

Individual complaints are the cornerstone of the Ombudsman’s role, **safeguarding fundamental rights** while **fostering participation** and active citizenship. I will prioritize ensuring efficient complaint-handling, reaching vulnerable and underrepresented groups, and

improving accessibility of information. Additionally, the office must be prepared to address complaints arising from the impact of digital technologies on citizens' rights.

2. Strategizing own initiative inquiries

While individual complaints address specific grievances and empower citizens directly, it is important to not overlook own initiative inquiries, particularly as a proactive mechanism to **identify systemic issues** within EU institutions. With also the support of the European Parliament, I aim to carefully select areas where own-initiative inquiries can have the most impact – such as enhancing institutional transparency and tackling inefficiencies. By aligning with the Parliament oversight priorities and leveraging its insights, these inquiries can become a powerful tool to reinforce citizen's trust and advance institutional reform.

3. Fostering Intelligent Partnerships

Recognizing the limits of a small office with a vast mandate, I will foster collaboration with national Ombudsman offices, academic institutions, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders. Such partnerships are critical for sharing best practices, enhancing institutional oversight, and building a more **responsive European governance framework**.

My experience with the European Network of Human Rights Institutions and the European Network of Ombudsman has demonstrated the **value of cooperation**. Together, we can create a seamless system that responds effectively to citizens' needs at both national and European levels.

Honourable Members,

I am deeply committed to leading with integrity, openness, and dedication. My goal is to ensure every citizen feels empowered to engage with EU institutions, confident that their concerns will be addressed fairly and transparently.

By strengthening **accountability, transparency, and inclusivity**, we can make the European Union a more trusted, responsive, and united community. I am sure these are goals we share and I look forward to deliver on them side by side with this Parliament.

Thank you.