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# Citizens' Rights improved as European Parliament Strengthens the Role of the EU Ombuds(wo)man

To improve democracy and the rights of citizens in Europe, the Greens/EFA decided to strengthen the European Ombudsperson's office so that it could better investigate maladministration and conflicts of interest. We also managed to secure a role for the Ombudsperson's Office in important areas such as whistleblower protection and sexual harassment.

These improvements were adopted by the European Parliament last week and the next step is for the Council to give its consent in order to finalise the reform of the Ombudsperson's Statute. These are the main highlights of the reform, initiated by the Greens/EFA Group and supported by a strong majority in the European Parliament.

## Improving the rights of investigation

The European Ombudsperson can initiate investigations, for example, based on a complaint from citizens or organisations. We wanted to make sure that the Ombudsperson would have fuller powers to investigate by:

- Strengthening the right to access classified documents, particularly those from the Member States
- Making sure that when public officials are brought to testify during an investigation, their professional secrecy obligations are not used to hide information that is relevant to the investigation
- Extending the deadline for citizen to make complaints about maladministration from 2 to 3 years
- Empowering the Ombudsperson to request to appear before the European Parliament to raise awareness about important investigations
- Ensuring the Ombudsperson periodically examines the EU institutions' procedures for preventing conflicts of interest
- Consolidating the Ombudsperson's power to conduct own-initiative and strategic inquiries
- Giving citizens a more active role so that they can submit comments or additional information at any stage during an Ombudspersons' investigation (rather than just at the beginning)
- Ensuring that the Ombudsperson's office is given an adequate budget that is sufficient to ensure the institution's independence

## Interacting with and advising whistleblowers

The European Ombudsperson will now have a clear role when it comes to whistleblowers, including:

- The explicit possibility to initiate inquiries based on information provided by whistleblowers, who may report also anonymously
- The certainty that professional secrecy obligations can be waived when EU staff report to the Ombudsperson
- The provision of impartial advice and expert guidance for potential whistleblowers so that they know what their rights are
- Conducting regular assessments of the policies in place in the EU institutions and making specific recommendations to improve the protection of whistleblowers who are EU staff

## Zero tolerance on sexual harassment

To end sexual harassment within the EU institutions, we decided to make sure that the Ombudsperson could intervene where necessary by:

- Regularly examining whether EU institutions are adequately handling sexual harassment cases, including appropriately penalising the perpetrators and providing victims with effective protection and support
- Appointing a specific person or structure with expertise in the field of harassment to provide advice to EU staff and other workers where appropriate
- Empowering EU staff and workers to report cases of sexual harassment directly to the Ombudsperson, without having to go through months of internal procedures
- The new rules also oblige the Ombudsperson's office to aim to achieve gender parity within the composition of the Secretariat and staff

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