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European Ombudsman Encouraged by Parliament

... to Increase Transparency, Participation and Accountability in the EU institutions

The European Parliament petitions committee today adopted its annual report on the activities of the European Ombudsman in which it congratulated the work done by Emily O'Reilly and her team so far to increase the transparency, good governance and accessibility of the EU institutions.

The European Parliament commended the Ombudsman's proactivity and increased use of strategic own-initiative inquiries and encouraged her to continue to work on a series of key issues such as access to documents, lobby transparency and the protection of whistleblowers. Here are some of the key points that the Greens/EFA group, led by Igor Soltes, defended in the drafting of the report:

1. Insistence on the need to improve transparency: This is true of all EU institutions but also particularly of the Council, as currently citizens find it very difficult to find out what their own governments are arguing and defending when they take part in Council meetings. The trilogue negotiations between the Commission, Council and Parliament should not be as secretive as they have been to date, which is why we encouraged the Ombudsman to continue her work on this issue.

2. Independence in the European Investment Bank's Complaints Mechanism: Currently, the EIB is revising its policy on how it deals with complaints, for example from communities that are negatively affected by EIB investments. The Ombudsman already made a series of recommendations, which we hope will be taken on board during the review. Key demands are to ensure the independence of the mechanism so that sensitive complaints are dealt with properly rather than being stalled. We also call for improvements in the screening and selection of projects to be financed, in order to avoid promoting projects that are against the public interest or that create disproportionate environmental damage.

3. Better lobbying transparency: In the report we encouraged the Ombudsman's office to do all they can to ensure greater lobbying transparency in Europe, not only in terms of publishing information about meetings with lobbyists, but we also called for better transparency on the funding behind different interest groups.

4. Protection of whistleblowers across the EU: In the report we managed to include a call for EU legislation that provides minimum levels of protection in all EU Member States, in all areas of EU competence.

5. Improvement of the EU citizens' initiative: The Ombudsman had previously expressed her views and concerns concerning the current functioning of the ECI, and we wanted to add more demands on how to improve the instrument, now that it is about to be reformed. Igor Soltes explained that: "With our amendment we wanted to make the ECI initiative more democratic and bring it closer to the citizens of the European Union by ensuring that an independent body carries out the initial verification of whether or not an ECI should be registered, thus taking this decision out of the hands of the Commission and hence avoiding this potential conflict of interest...

Even the European Citizens' Initiative against TTIP, which gathered more than 4 million signatures from EU citizens, was not accepted by the European Commission. This shows that urgent and ambitious reform is needed if the European Citizens' Initiative is to live up to its promise of delivering better democratic participation."

In this vein, we also called for proper follow-up by the Commission to take place within 12 months of the submission of a successful ECI, and for more transparency in the funding or sponsorships of the ECI citizen's committees responsible. This amendment was not carried by the Petitions committee, but the reform of the ECI is being handled by the Constitutional Affairs Committee, so watch this space for more!

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