



G. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



A basic principle in the functioning of the Greek Ombudsman is the maintenance of regular, close contact with ombudsman institutions in other countries. This contact is of fundamental assistance in helping the office deal with the wide range of complex issues raised by the complaints submitted, in accordance with the principles of transparency, accountability, meritocracy, and best practice. Increasingly, these principles are coming to define relations between citizens and the state in modern, progressive democracies. The institution of the ombudsman has a long tradition in Europe, where it was first established in the early 19th century (Sweden, 1809). Ombudsman institutions now operate in more than 90 countries throughout the world, 27 of them in Europe.

Accordingly, the Greek Ombudsman undertook the following four initiatives during the institution's first year of operations in Greece: 1) he visited the European Ombudsman, 2) held a workshop with European ombudsmen, 3) visited the British Parliamentary Committee for Administration, 4) and participated in the annual meeting of European ombudsmen.

A) VISIT BY THE GREEK OMBUDSMAN TO THE EUROPEAN OMBUDSMAN

The European Ombudsman, Jacob Söderman, invited the Greek Ombudsman to visit his offices in Strasbourg on 16 and 17 December, 1998. During a long working meeting, Professor Diamandouros informed Mr. Söderman about the progress made by the new institution in Greece, and at the same time acquired a wealth of information about the functioning of the institution, both at the European Union level and within the EU member-states. Professor Diamandouros invited the European Ombudsman to visit Greece during 1999, in order to see at first hand how the Institution of the Ombudsman is operating in our country. Professor Diamandouros's two-day visit to Strasbourg coincided with a plenary session of

the European Parliament, enabling him to attend the Parliament and to meet with a significant number of Greek EuroMPs of all political persuasions, in order to inform them about the progress of the institution in Greece, and to answer their questions.

B) WORKSHOP WITH EUROPEAN OMBUDSMEN

In the context of cultivating and developing the institution's international relations, the Greek Ombudsman organised a workshop, on 10-12 December 1998, at the office in Athens with the participation of four European Ombudsmen, who are also the European members of the board of the International Ombudsman Institute. The four ombudsmen attending were:

- Marten Oosting, professor at the University of Groningen, President of the International Ombudsman Institute, the Ombudsman of the Netherlands.
- Hans Gammeltoft-Hansen, professor at the University of Copenhagen, Regional Vice-President (Europe) of the International Ombudsman Institute, the Ombudsman of Denmark.
- Kevin Murphy, the Ombudsman of Ireland.
- Ivan Bizjak, former Minister of the Interior, member of the board of the International Ombudsman Institute, the Ombudsman of Slovenia.

The Ombudsman of Cyprus was unable to attend, but sent three observers in his stead. The overall purpose of this meeting was to inform the ombudsmen of these countries how the office was operating in Greece and to provide an opportunity for a discussion between the foreign ombudsmen and the Greek professional staff. The fertile exchange of views concerning the experiences of the institution in other countries provided considerable insight into how it might function more smoothly in Greece, within the European Union, and within broader European and international contexts. These members of the International



Ombudsman Institute were invited because the institution of the Ombudsman in these countries has been particularly successful and widely recognised. Each of these four individuals has helped to improve the civil service and the quality of democracy in their countries, and has made a considerable contribution to the recognition and legitimation of the institution of the Ombudsman in his country.

The main topics of discussion at the workshop were the relationship between the ombudsman and the administration (the possible contribution of the institution to the shaping of a new and improved administrative culture), relations with citizens (public relations policy), internal organisation (work flow, annual reports), legal issues (defining maladministration), and issues of staffing and technical infrastructure (personnel, funding). After detailed presentations and extensive discussion, the following main conclusions were reached:

- In all of these countries, the Ombudsman enjoys constitutional guarantees as an independent administrative authority.
- The constitutionally guaranteed independence of the institution provides a moral authority and credibility which make its interventions accepted.
- The role of the institution is to solve problems through communication between the administration and citizens, not through the threat of sanctions beyond the possibilities provided by law (making recommendations, publishing findings, and informing parliament). At any rate, in most cases there is no need for compulsion since the civil services rarely refuse to comply with recommendations made.
- It was a common conclusion that the content of complaints concern approximately the same issues of maladministration, with particular

emphasis on violations of human rights (police, immigrants, etc.). Interventions made by the ombudsman on his own initiative were mentioned for all these countries.

- The mass media is the mechanism used to publicise the institution and its responsibilities, as well as its reports which may apportion responsibilities to public services.

C) VISIT BY THE GREEK OMBUDSMAN TO THE BRITISH PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR ADMINISTRATION

At the initiative of the British Embassy in Greece and following an invitation from the British Foreign Secretary, the Greek Ombudsman visited London between 26 and 29 July 1998 and met successively with the British Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, Mr. Michael Buckley, and other ombudsmen responsible for specific aspects of relations between the British administration and the public, such as local government, policing, and minority affairs.

These meetings were particularly useful as a source of information about the functioning of the institution and the problems it encounters in the United Kingdom. They were also useful in providing printed material clearly describing the rules and practices followed by the various UK ombudsmen in carrying out their duties.

D) THE ANNUAL MEETING OF EUROPEAN OMBUDSMEN

In order to meet with his European counterparts for the first time, the Greek Ombudsman attended the annual meeting of European ombudsmen held in Malta on 6 October 1998.