



Closing Event – 2 February 2016: 10.10 a.m. - Address by Mrs. Gertrude Brinek, Member of the Austrian Ombudsman Board, MS Project Leader

Dear Ombudsman Memeti, dear colleagues, ladies and gentleman,

I am pleased to be back here at the EU Info Centre for today's closing ceremony of our Twinning Light project.

The idea of an Ombudsman was developed in Sweden over 200 years ago. Over the last 40 years, Ombudsman institutions on national, regional and local levels have been established around the world. By following up citizens' complaints and initiating its own investigations Ombudsman offices contribute to the rule of law and to accountability. They stand for the protection of human rights and foster good administration. Nowadays, the institution is considered an essential element a democratic state and as a consequence the existence of an Ombudsman institution as a national oversight mechanism plays a role when it comes to membership in the EU.

The office of the Ombudsman of Macedonia took up its work in 1997 and has ever since been monitoring the public administration. Like numerous other Ombudsman institutions, particularly in Europe, it also works as the National Preventive Mechanism and is in charge of promoting and protecting human rights.

Due to the years of experience and the office's excellent cooperation in the international Ombudsman community no basic training was needed. On the contrary, the overall objective of this Twinning project was to enhance the capacities of the office and to promote the Ombudsman among the citizens and relevant institutions by strengthening its visibility.

The project consisted of various activities during 178 working days which were tailored according to the specifications and needs expressed by the beneficiary institution. The explicit goal by the twinning partners, the Austrian Ombudsman Board in cooperation with the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights, was to deliver an on-the-job training, to give a forum of exchange between practitioners where challenges of the daily handling of complaints and monitoring of human right standards can be openly discussed.

A main part of the project focused on strengthening the skills of the six regional offices of the Ombudsman. Between June and November our team went to Bitola, Kichevo,



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Kumanovo, Shtip, Strumica and Tetovo. At each office a training based on practical experiences according to international standards and best practices was conducted. Our team accompanied consultations with citizens and three visits to local schools and interviews with local media.

During Component 2 we worked on digital media and the maintenance of website. We organized a public event in Gevgelija and started an electronic newsletter.

Component 3 included three very successful round tables on “Street Children’s access to rights”, “Roma inclusion in primary education” and “Autism in elementary education”.

During Component 4 a daily center for street children was visited and recommendations were developed.

During Component 5 one home for the elderly, one center for rehabilitation and two social care centres were visited and recommendations were drawn up.

Finally, under Component 6 the National Preventive Mechanism was trained and the team visited a centre for asylum seekers (Vizbegovo) together with the international experts. A delegation of the Macedonian office visited the Austrian office in Vienna in July for a study visit.

What proved particularly fruitful were joint visits of the preventive team – the NPM - together with the Department of Special Needs in the fall. Precisely when staff resources are scarce it is essential to take advantage of existing knowledge and experience and use synergies.

Although the project contributed to providing the beneficiary institution with instruments, concepts and guidelines for a more effective protection of fundamental rights and freedoms, there are still challenges ahead. In order to work effectively, Ombudsman offices, National Preventive Mechanism and National Human Rights Institutions need adequate financial and personnel resources. Sufficient funding and the ability to recruit qualified, independent staff to perform the tasks properly are important components of an Ombudsman’s independence. It should be in the interest of Parliament and the Government to have a well-functioning and independent institution that monitors the administration and can point out deficits in laws.

In this context it is worth mentioning that the European Commission in its latest Progress Report states that the organisation of the Macedonian administration does



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not yet ensure effective lines of accountability. The Office of the Ombudsman remains the key oversight institution underpinning democratic values in the country and continues to deliver on its constitutional and legal mandate to protect citizens' rights. If accountability is taken seriously, this key institution needs to be provided with the resources to effectively carry out its duties.

Increasing the visibility of the office of the Ombudsman is specifically important to raise awareness among citizens, particularly vulnerable groups and in the rural areas, about their rights. Visibility is closely linked to the case work of the legal advisers. Providing concrete examples of cases in an easily understandable language and an accessible way contributes to public education and hopefully encourages others to seek protection of their rights.

Before concluding I would like to thank Ombudsman Memeti and his team, in particular, Ms Slavica Dimitrievska, for their hard work and the excellent cooperation but also their hospitality with the Austrian twinning team and myself. Special thanks go to all of the experts involved in the project, particularly Dr. Peter Kastner, our key expert, who showed outstanding commitment to this project. I would also like to thank Mr. Christian Wawrinec from the Boltzmann Institute of Human Rights for the excellent project management.

Today we close this project but I am convinced that the close cooperation between our offices will continue.

Thank you for your attention!

Check against delivery