

Acting as NHRI to protect and promote the rights of Bulgarian citizens before international institutions

An important focus in the work of the Ombudsman is the protection of the rights and interests of Bulgarian citizens before international institutions. In 2019, the Public Advocate took a series of actions to look for cooperation with European colleagues – Ombudspersons, the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and the President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani and all Bulgarian Members of the European Parliament on diverse important causes in the interest of the Bulgarian citizens.

– **On 11 January 2019, the Ombudsman sent a letter request cooperation to the European Ombudsman Emily O’Reilly in relation to the disputed legislative amendments to the Mobility 1 Package, also known as the Macron Plan, which breach the interests of Bulgarian transporters.**

The Public Advocate also addressed letters to the President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker and the President of the European Parliament Antonio Tajani insisting that the amendments should not be put to the vote at the European Parliament given its elapsing term of office.

– **On 22 January 2019, the Ombudsman defended a petition against the double standard in food before the Petitions Committee of the European Parliament which was submitted together with Bulgarian citizens. In it, the Ombudsman insists on terminating the manufacture and distribution of foods of the same brand but with different ingredients and quality in the EU Member States through amendments to the EU legislation and the Unfair Commercial Practices Directive.**



On 15 April 2019, the Ombudsman sent letters to the Ombudspersons in the EU inviting them to call on the Members of the European Parliament from their States to vote against the double standard of food.

On 17 April 2019, the European Parliament put an end to the double standard of food in the EU as, at its last plenary session, it adopted a new commercial mechanism for consumer which declares the offering of food from the same brand but with different ingredients and quality to be an unfair commercial practice.

Meetings organised by the Ombudsman across borders

On 20 February 2019, during a visit to Greece to take part in the international conference “State and Society: Challenges to Rights and Freedoms” organised on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Ombudsman institution in our Southern neighbour, the Ombudsman held a reception event for more than 100 Bulgarians. The problems are summarised in three main groups – pensions, driver’s licenses and – a particularly hot topic – Bulgarians are taken to court in Greece because their names are still on the documents of vehicles they no longer own but which are used to commit a crime – trafficking in migrants. The Greek side refuses to accept the evidentiary value of Bulgarian official documents such as sale agreements, evidencing the transfer of ownership of the vehicles before the crime was committed.

On 19 March 2019 and 1 October 2019, the Ombudsman organised two joint reception events with the Serbian Ombudsman Zoran Pasalic for Bulgarians in Tsaribrod and Bosilegrad.

The Bulgarian minority in Tsaribrod raised the issue about 30% Bulgarian content in the curricula in geography, history, music and art. The Ombudsman promised to assist for a meeting in Sofia with the team of the Serbian Ministry of Education in order to put the matter up for discussion and find a solution with the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science.

The issues Bulgarians face in Serbia include the problem with the broadcasting of BNT and the main national television stations as well as the possibility for Bulgarian women to be registered in the civil registers with their Bulgarian family names. The problems the Bulgarian citizens in Bosilegrad face are similar – lack of pre-school education in Bulgarian, lack of aids for the textbooks in geography and history, people leaving the city due to unemployment.

The main problem raised before the two Ombudspersons both by Bulgarian and Serbian citizens is the pollution of soils and water in the region, the abrupt increase in the number of malignant illnesses and deaths, the long term to acquire Bulgarian citizenship.



Reception event of the Ombudsman in Bosilegrad, Serbia

On 7 October 2019, the Ombudsman sent a recommendation to the Foreign Minister, the Minister of Environment and Waters and the Minister of Health insisting on measures and timely information for the public in relation to the environmental problems in Bosilegrad, Serbia, and the Western Outlands which threaten the health and lives of people. The recommendation was prompted by complaints from Bulgarians and Serbian citizens from Bosilegrad who raised an alarm about the pollution to the soil and water from the mines in border areas.

International cooperation, participation of the Ombudsman in forums, meetings and initiatives related to the protection of the human rights

Campaign of the Ombudsman in support of women and children who are victims of violence

On the **UN International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women**, the Ombudsman organised a thematic reception desk for women who are victims of violence and launched the **Silence Kills! Campaign**. The building of the institution was lit up in orange – the colour of the UN campaign against harassment against women.



On 14 October 2019, Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva discussed violence against women with the UN Special Rapporteur Dubravka Simonovic who was on a visit to Bulgaria in order to get acquainted with the Bulgarian system of preventing and combating violence against women and children.

27 November 2019:
Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva and Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Dunja Mijatovic discussed the fight against violence and discrimination in Bulgaria.



International cooperation

On 21 February 2019, Deputy Ombudsman Diana Kovacheva took part in the **hearing before the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** on very hot topics – poverty and the risk of social exclusion, hate speech, the importance of education to integration, early school leaving and measures to deal with the problem, as well as the rights of the child, the rights of persons with disabilities, protection of the rights of persons with mental disabilities, eviction in the case of illegal construction.



On 8-9 April 2019, the Ombudsman and Deputy Ombudsman took part in the **Annual Conference of the European Network of Ombudsmen in Brussels**. The forum at the European Parliament makes an assessment as to the effectiveness of the democratic instruments through which the citizens of Europe can take part in the formation of policies and decisions which have a direct impact on them.

On 27 May 2019, the Deputy Ombudsman hosted a working meeting at the institution of the Public Advocate with the participation of Greek delegates representing the association Alliance for Protection against Gender-Based Violence, the National Secretariat for Equality at the Ministry of the Interior of our Southern neighbour, the National Centre for the Study of Equality and Diotima Association – Republic of Greece.



International activities and cooperation of the Ombudsman as the National Preventive Mechanism (NPM)

In 2019, the NPM intensified its cooperation with a number of national and international partners such as government institutions, non-governmental organisations, international authorities and organisations.



The NPM participates as a member in the **Network of National Preventive Mechanisms in Southeastern Europe:**

- NPM Policies Regarding Coercive Measures (June 2019)
- Special Needs of Children at Detention Facilities (October 2019).
- A meeting of the Network of Children’s Ombudsmen in Southeastern Europe on the topic of “Migration and Children” – October 2019
- In November 2019, an NPM expert attended the training for European monitoring persons in forced return which is carried out under the FReM III project and is organised by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development.

The **second regional meeting of the European Network of Ombudsmen** was held in December 2019; at the meeting, the following topics were discussed with representatives of Ombudsman institutions from Malta, Cyprus, Spain and Portugal:

- Role of national ombudsmen and their powers in relation to using and paying EU structural and investment funds.
- Asylum and migration. Monitoring of the implementation of coercive administrative measures by the Ombudsman.
- Right to free movement and equal treatment.