



**Address at the Parliament of the Republic of Austria on the occasion of the
10th Anniversary of the Austrian Ombudsman Board's OPCAT mandate**

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Introduction

Guten Tag

I thank his Excellency Dr Alexander Van Der Bellen, Federal President for his welcome. May I also express my sincerest thanks to members of the Austrian Ombudsman Board for their kind invitation to undertake an official visit to Graz, Styria and Vienna and also welcome fellow speakers and distinguished guests.

It is both an honour and a privilege for me to be here today, to join with you in the Parliament at the Hofburg, recognising the significant milestone that is the tenth anniversary of the Austrian Ombudsman Board's OPCAT mandate; a mandate to protect and promote human rights within the Republic of Austria in places where people may be deprived of their liberty, but also more broadly to circumstances where human rights violations are a risk.

The tenth anniversary

The tenth anniversary of the Austrian Ombudsman Board protecting human rights under its OPCAT mandate should be a source of great pride not only for the people gathered in this place, but indeed, for all the people of Austria. No nation can make

any claim to greatness, to its place in the modern world and its capacity to provide international leadership, without an unambiguous commitment to human rights, and particularly so the rights of its most vulnerable and marginalized citizens and citizens who are at risk.

Human Rights

The great humanist philosopher Immanuel Kant observed that “Every person is to be respected as an absolute end in themselves; and it is a crime against the dignity that belongs to them as human beings, to use them as a mere means for some external purpose.” And we today reflect the truth of these words. There can be no external purpose of governments, or the organs of the state or the private sector, that can ever justify the crime against the dignity of our fellow citizens that human rights violations so self-evidently represent.

Not only are such violations a direct affront to the innate dignity of all human beings, but it is all the more egregious when perpetrated against the vulnerable, marginalised or those otherwise at risk who deserve the protection of the State and the assurance that their innate rights will be preserved and championed.

OPCAT

OPCAT is an incredibly powerful mechanism to prevent human rights violations. It is truly a system of human rights ennobled and enabled. It brings together international, national and subnational governments, offices of statutory remit, academic and non-government actors in a way that focusses our greatest attention to the areas of greatest need.

It is no way unusual that Ombudsmen have been chosen to undertake these NPM roles. Indeed, quite the contrary. An NPM role under OPCAT is a logical, thoughtful and practical extension of the traditional conception of the Ombudsman to mediate between the power of the State and fairness and dignity for individual citizens. This has been a role of the Ombudsman for more than two centuries.

Austria and OPCAT

The Austrian Ombudsman Board, together with its federal commission and six regional commissions, are rightly highly regarded for their work in the protection of human rights. This reflects how the Republic of Austria has been, more broadly, at the forefront of global human rights protection efforts for decades. Austria, of course, is a domicile for supranational human rights bodies.

But Austrian leadership on these issues has a proud history. One of our Speakers today, Associate Professor Doctor Ranata Kickar, in 1988 was one of the organisers of a colloquium in Graz regarding the drafting of OPCAT.

I had the enormous honour of being hosted by mein freund, the Secretary General and Ombudsman of the Republic of Austria, Mr Werner Amon, in Styria over the last few days, including the extraordinary city of Graz. While there, I did reflect on the power of those that combine moral clarity, foresight and commitment to protect those in society who are at risk and the debt that we owe them.

Indeed, these hugely influential contributions from Austrian leaders can be seen throughout the history of the development of OPCAT and its preventative visiting paradigm. It is also notable that Austria was a signatory of OPCAT in the first year in which it was possible.

In both my capacity as President of the IOI and as Ombudsman that has recently been designated in my country as an NPM, I can confidently say, without exaggeration, that we all owe a great debt to the people of Austria, and in particular a number of Austrian leaders, to create both a principled regime, but also a wholly practical mechanism for the prevention of human rights violations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as we reflect on the achievements of the Austrian Ombudsman Board over the last forty-five years, and there is a rich landscape of achievements to survey, it is perhaps its human rights work that presents itself with the greatest command of

our attention. For this work is not just giving life to a critical mandate; it is the achievement of an inarguable and universal moral imperative – the right to dignity in circumstances where the loss of that dignity is most at risk.

On behalf of the more than two hundred Ombudsmen, Public Defenders and Human Rights Institutions that count themselves as members of the International Ombudsman Institute, I express my profound gratitude to the Austrian Ombudsman Board for ten years of human rights protection in Austria and for its leadership globally.

May I thank the Chair of the Volksanwaltschaft for his beautiful contribution on classical guitar, along with his fellow musicians, of Beethoven's ninth symphony. Beethoven's ninth, in English, as you would know, translates as "Ode to Joy"! Let this day be an ode to our shared commitment to human rights. Be they prisoners, the elderly, the disabled or marginalised and vulnerable, our role as NPM, is to play a vital oversight role to protect and promote their fundamental human rights.

I congratulate the Austrian Ombudsman Board on reaching this tenth anniversary milestone. I have complete confidence that it will continue to fulfil this critically important mandate in service of the Parliament of the Republic of Austria and for all Austrian citizens.

Danke schoen