

Warsaw, fall 2017

Address tot Adam Bodnar,  
Commissioner for Human Rights Poland  
Celebrating 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his Act

Dear Adam, dear all,

Allow me to kick off with this little story. As any ombudsman, I love telling stories, because every time a citizen finds an ombudsman, the ombudsman becomes part of the individual story of this citizen.

This is the story. There was this Polish guy. He had been wanted all over Europe racking up scores of speeding tickets and parking fines. However, each time he was stopped, he managed to evade justice by giving a different address.

Only after a long investigation the case was solved. The Polish citizen the Western European police had been looking for all that time – a certain Mister Prawo Jazdy, so Prawo Jazdy – turned out to be the Polish word for driving licence ... and not the first and surname on the licence (as many police officers on the field abusively noted down in their books).

I keep on telling stories like this for different reasons.

**No doubt, one of the reasons to tell such stories, is that an ombudsman in a mature democracy will help improve the service, in both directions.**

In this story, mister Prawo Jazdy is not to blame, nor are the numerous actual Polish drivers who managed to escape from fines. But, on the other hand, it

will not be the ombudsman who will oppose when government organizes itself to prevent making this same mistake again and again. In my country, Flanders, Belgium, I am the ombudsman for fines, when Polish and all other truck drivers do not respect or pay toll on our roads.

In some circumstances, I will help them and convince the agency issuing the fines to be more lenient or to improve the communication with foreigners, by using pictogram for example. But, on the other hand, I told the Prawo Jazdy story to the agency, with result: until today Flanders didn't issue not one fine to any Prawo Jazdy.

But there is a second reason. Indeed, "improving the service" is not what I consider as my core business as the ombudsman of the 7 million inhabitants of Flanders, Belgium. What I do consider a my core business, is trying to translate different point of views on the same facts and helping to find reconciliation and showing results in this – in 2016 the overall reconciliation system of Flanders, ombudsman included, showed more than 2.000 of such individual results.

Among those results, there are very small and sometimes bigger steps in the field of human rights. Among the most recent results, there is the example of a result for a woman, living in social housing. As she is turning older, she doesn't walk as easy anymore and uses a wheelchair. When she asked if the doorstep to her apartment could be adapted, the housing company refused. They did not want any exception. The woman came to the ombudsman and we convinced the housing company that there were good reasons to see this "not as an exception" but as "a reasonable adjustment".

I can tell you many other stories like this one, about how we obtain results in different key human rights issues such as education, health, water and electricity supply, work, ... such as better financial coverage of breast reconstruction after cancer operation or better protection of pregnant women when a woman came to find the ombudsman after a government agency refused to postpone a selection day during the hiring process., and

so on ...

But what I want to say most about these kind of stories and about mister Prawo Jazdy, is that I am here today to witness about ombudsman offices who are always willing and ready to try and find solutions.

Adam, Anna, Rafael, Reinier, and so many other colleagues, we know and we understand, that it is not always easy for us, to really understand well what is really going on.

It is not easy to understand and translate things in our countries. Not easy to understand what is going on all over Western-Europe or Poland. Not easy to understand the state of the world.

But one thing is sure, we – the ombudsman, the commissioners for human rights, or whatever other title or name we might have - we will keep on to try to understand and seek for translations in all kinds of circumstances. When others seek polarization, the ombudsman will keep on trying to find reconciliation.

Dear Adam. It is in this respect that I came today tot Warsaw.

I appreciate the way your office did this over the past 30 years and I wish and I am convinced that we will all find ways to keep on doing this for several more 30 years ahead.

Bart Weekers, @vlaamsombudsman (twitter)