



EUROMIL aisbl

(European Organisation of
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Ombuds Institutions and Military Associations: partners or competitors?

First, I want to thank the organisers for giving me, for giving EUROMIL, the floor at the 7th ICOAF meeting.

Let me briefly recall what EUROMIL is and what its objectives are.

- The European Organisation of Military Associations (EUROMIL) was founded in 1972.
- Today, it has 41 member associations from 25 European countries.
- Amongst the members are national trade unions as well as military associations.
- Until today, not all soldiers in Europe enjoy the right of association despite several international treaties and conventions.
- It is however important that soldiers can organize themselves in a free and democratic way to defend their social and economic rights.
- EUROMIL supports them and defends human rights and fundamental freedoms in the armed forces.

These aims are the perfect link to what this session is about, namely the relationship between ombuds institutions and civil society in the democratic oversight of armed forces. Looking at the goals of military associations or trade unions and those of ombuds institutions one could ask whether "***Ombuds Institutions and Military Associations are partners or competitors?***" This question is the title of my short speech and I look forward to debating it.

When we look closer at the goals of ombuds institutions and representative staff associations, we could say that both strive for independence and impartiality. The effectiveness of both depends on trust and respect towards the institution "armed forces" and the state in a broader context. But also trust and respect towards the people, the citizens. And soldiers are 'citizens in uniform' - a principle that EUROMIL is defending since 1972.

In reality, at least this is what should be their goal: Ombuds institutions should try to improve the relationship between - in this case - the members of the armed forces, the administration - here: the defence staff - and depending on the subject also the political leadership or the minister of defence in particular. They should avoid unnecessary and unwanted conflicts but promote solutions - wherever possible - for all concerned parties.

I am convinced that military associations and trade unions should act following the same principles and goals. Also for representative staff associations the first priority should be to establish and maintain a good relationship between all partners in the defence sector. A good relationship build on mutual trust and



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respect is the basic element for a successful social dialogue that will be beneficial for the individual soldier - and in extension his family - as well as the armed forces as a whole.

A world in which trade unions, military associations and ombuds institutions can - under all circumstances - avoid conflicts between military representatives and the military and/or political leadership would be perfect. The world however, is not perfect. Therefore it is more than ever needed that military associations look for partners. Given the current situation of the armed forces, especially in Europe, it is absolutely necessary to join forces. It is essential for ombuds institutions, representative associations and trade unions to work together in order to defend the individual soldier but also the military society as such in these times of austerity measures and ongoing defence reforms. It is the democratic responsibility of governments and parliaments to take decisions, including budgetary decisions, and to make sure that their countries survive times of crises. But it is also their duty to make sure that defence forces can function and act in the framework that has been decided on in a national but especially an international environment. Ombuds institutions and representatives of military personnel must play a roll in these difficult times: acting as responsible institutions and reacting through the available channels even before decisions are taken is indispensable. They should, however, not try to take the place of the democratically elected representatives of the people but should inform them, advise them and be the voice of the soldiers and their families. In all over Europe, there are hundreds of thousands and worldwide many millions of soldiers with their families who deserve be treated with respect.

Therefore ombuds institutions as well as staff associations are a crucial element in the public involvement in democratic oversight of armed forces.

Together they can and should play an important role in making sure that the armed forces act in accordance with the rule of law, with respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. In this context it is important to ensure that every single member of the defence forces is granted human rights and fundamental freedoms. How can one ask soldiers to defend or reinstall human rights and fundamental freedoms in all parts of the world, when they themselves do not enjoy them in their everyday life?

Looking at these challenges I would like to conclude with three key messages:

- Firstly, ombuds institutions as well as military associations and trade unions should be free and democratic bodies.
- Secondly, they should establish good relations between ombuds institutions and staff association but of course also with the defence forces as such. Relations must be based on mutual respect and trust.
- Thirdly, they should not take the place of democratic elected governments and parliaments but present themselves to be a partner and independent advisory body in order to make sure that decisions are



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taken with respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms also when it comes to military personnel.

Are ombuds institutions needed, wanted and acceptable? Are military associations and trade unions needed, wanted and acceptable? On all these questions my answer is yes, yes and yes! I am convinced that such institutions and associations make armed forces stronger, more democratic and above all a better workplace for the defence personnel.

And are armed forces personnel not our main wealth, but at the same time also the biggest challenge? Well, let us work together in order to defend their rights and freedoms but also pointing out their obligations. In this way, we, Ombuds Institutions and associations and trade unions, will be a part of the solution and not of the problem!