

2. International activities

2.1. International Ombudsman Institute (I.O.I.)

The AOB was successful in the selection procedure to host the seat of the I.O.I. General Secretariat that has been underway since the end of 2007. During the board meeting held in Hong Kong from 5 to 7 November 2008, where the AOB was represented by Ombudspersons Dr. Kostelka and Dr. Brinek, the I.O.I. Board unanimously resolved to advise the general assembly, which would be convened in Stockholm in June 2009, to accept the Austrian offer. It was anticipated that the general assembly would comply with the recommendation of the board of directors.

General Secretariat is moving to Vienna

The AOB successfully passed the selection procedure because, thanks to the comprehensive support by the federal government and Parliament, it conclusively demonstrated its ability to fulfil all requirements set by the I.O.I. A long-term perspective, which is secure both financially and with regard to staff, for the better handling of administrative issues appeared to be of particular relevance to the I.O.I. The AOB's bid met this core criterion by holding out the prospect of forming an in-house international department that would also assume the duties of the I.O.I. Secretariat with a staff of three full-time civil servants and an adequate budget.

Selection procedure

Immediately after the results of the I.O.I. board meeting were announced, the preparations for the relocation of the I.O.I. administrative headquarters from its current location in Edmonton, Canada to Vienna were intensified. In conformance with the objectives of the I.O.I., the new Secretariat should be able to start full operations in early autumn 2009.

Schedule

With its efforts to host the I.O.I. Secretariat, the AOB has proven its international orientation in accordance with the government programme for 2008-2013. At the same time, it has demonstrated its readiness to commit itself on an international level to the principles of democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights, the realisation of which is a core interest of the I.O.I.

2.2. Council of Europe

The activities of the Council of Europe with reference to human rights protection are of particular relevance for the AOB. AOB members and employees actively participated in a variety of projects and events last year. In June 2008 the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe and the French Ombudsman sponsored a workshop in Paris, at which human rights experts from over 30 countries, including representatives of European ombudsman institutions, the Council of Europe and the United Nations dealt with the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture (OPCAT). In his speech Ombudsman

Active participation in conferences

Dr. Kostelka dealt with preventative mechanisms against abuse in penal institutions on a national level.

Together with the ombudsman institutions of Belgium, France and Northern Ireland, the AOB is participating in a pilot project initiated by the Commissioner for Human Rights. The project specifically deals with the question which role ombudsman institutions can play in the implementation of rulings by the European Court of Justice for Human Rights. AOB employees are also participating in the further expansion of an active network of independent national human rights institutions. This so-called "peer-to-peer project" was initiated in 2007 by the Council of Europe in cooperation with the EU. AOB employees participated in the seminars offered for employees of human rights organizations on OPCAT mechanisms and human rights protection for illegal migrants, among other topics.

Pilot project

The fifth of the round tables organized annually by the Human Rights Commissioner for the national human rights organizations in Europe took place in Dublin on 16 and 17 September 2008 and was dedicated to the topic: *Domestic Protection of Human Rights – Strengthening Independent National Structures*. Participants, including Ombudsperson Mag. Stoitsits, not only had the opportunity to exchange information on their experiences regarding the influence of human rights organizations on legislation of the human rights awareness and education but were also able to establish contact with the UN and the European Agency for Fundamental Rights.

**Round table
in Dublin**

2.3. Bilateral contacts and projects

Last year as well, AOB employees focused on a more lively exchange of ideas and a more intensive cooperation with neighbouring countries. During a visit to their Slovenian colleagues on 18 and 19 February 2008, the members of the AOB were particularly interested in the legal foundations of its sister institution and its specific competencies and practices. The Slovenian ombudsman institution was a partner of AOB in a training programme initiated by the OSCE Mission in Skopje for employees of the Macedonian ombudsman. The programme dealt primarily with forms of discrimination and strategies to deal with it in complaint proceedings. Ombudsperson Mag. Dr. Fekter and an associate developed model solutions for specific cases with the participants.

**Intensive
bilateral
contacts**

The AOB pursued its goal of intensifying the international transfer of know-how in 2008 as well. Two representatives of the recently installed Egyptian ombudsman institution spent several days at the AOB in Vienna in order to learn about the customary methods of processing complaints at the AOB, its handling of requests by the media and the basic principles of electronic file management. To support the ombudsman institution recently created in Serbia, preparations were made during 2008 for a secondment of experts. At a seminar in Sofia about standards and norms for ombudsman activities, perspectives for closer cooperation were developed jointly with the Bulgarian ombudsman.

**Know-how
transfer**

The exchange of expertise with other ombudsman institutions also played a key role last year. The range of queries was considerable, covering different topics, such as the duties and competencies of the AOB, the national legislative situation in the area of domestic violence, problems relating to access to information, diverse aspects of ethnic profiling and interaction with the police.

Exchange of expertise

2.4. International conferences

The first meeting of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) with national human rights organizations in Vienna on 16 May 2008, at which AOB was represented by one expert, enabled insight into the work methods and goals of the newly formed FRA. The AOB seeks closer cooperation, as was clearly expressed by Ombudsperson Dr. Brinek during the First Conference on Fundamental Rights, which was held by FRA in cooperation with the French Ministry of Justice from 8 to 9 December 2008 in Paris.

EU Agency for Fundamental Rights

The meeting of the liaison officers of the European Network for Ombudspersons and similar institutions, which took place from 1 to 3 June 2008 in Strasbourg, was utilised by the AOB as an opportunity to continue the cooperation with the European ombudspersons. The Network organised the Sixth Seminar of Regional Ombudspersons and Petition Committees from the EU in Berlin from 2 to 4 November 2008. The topic was: *Protection of Society's Weakest: The Role of Complaints and Petitions*, attracting the participation of ombudsperson Mag. Stoitsits.

European Network for Ombudspersons

2.5. Research project

The study initiated by Univ.-Prof. Kucsko-Stadlmayer (University of Vienna) in 2005 entitled, *European Ombudsman Institutions*, was published by Springer in spring of 2008. The English version of the study followed in autumn 2008. The detailed publication (more than 500 pages), which undertakes a legal comparison of 49 European ombudsman institutions, has been extremely positively received, which is why the continuation of the study project on an international level is now being considered.

International comparative law