

Opening

Madam Moderator, Your Excellencies, fellow panellists, ladies and gentlemen,

A woman receives a letter. A decision—perhaps algorithmic, perhaps human—she will never know, shatters her life. Her home. Her benefits. Custody of her child. The process is opaque. The appeal, a distant prospect. The institution meant to protect her from precisely this moment exists only on paper.

This is the everyday reality for millions of people in states that have ratified all the relevant instruments and utter the words '*human rights*' with an almost musical fluidity.

This is the paradox that the resolution adopted by consensus by this Assembly forces us to face: the architecture of rights has never been so elaborate, and the gap between that architecture and the person who depends on it has never been so vast.

The Venice Principles exist to bridge that gap. Not as a text of aspiration, but as an operational benchmark.

The enabling environment that this panel is called upon to examine is not a diplomatic formula. It is a precise institutional framework comprising twenty-five principles which, together, guarantee seven essential pillars: constitutional anchoring; irremovability; financial autonomy; *ex officio* powers; unimpeded access; functional immunity; and, *finally*, the obligation to follow up. Each of these pillars addresses a specific vulnerability, identified by the accumulated experience of half a century of ombudsman practice around the world.

An enabling environment is not merely an atmosphere. It is an architecture. And each principle is a building block of that architecture.

But the experience of the IOI, which brings together more than 200 institutions in over 100 countries, reveals that this architecture is under attack according to a recognisable pattern that transcends regions and political regimes.

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I identify here three recurring challenges that emerge from our collective observation.

The first is silent budgetary suffocation. It does not destroy the institution; it strips it of its function. A major survey that cannot be completed. A remote community that cannot be visited. A systemic report that cannot be published. It is a form of stifling that leaves no visible trace, and Principle 21 of the Venice Principles exists precisely to make this impossible.

The second challenge is the discreet politicisation of appointments. Leaders chosen not for their capacity for dissent, but for their instinct for deference. Principles 6 to 9 address this with a threefold requirement: transparency of the process, a qualified parliamentary majority, and strictly defined criteria for dismissal.

The third challenge, more recent and more insidious, is narrative erosion. The practice of publicly discrediting the institution to discourage institutional courage. Principle 24 expressly prohibits States from taking any action aimed at impeding the effective functioning of the Ombudsman.

Let me be blunt:

An Ombudsman who does not investigate the government is not an Ombudsman. It is a communication strategy with a mandate.

But then, why is compliance still so slow, and what are the real obstacles to the implementation of the Venice Principles?

I will answer frankly, because this question deserves it: the obstacles to compliance are almost never technical. They are, almost always, political.

A state that genuinely wishes to comply with the Venice Principles can do so within a single legislative term. What stands in the way is not complexity. It is the perception that strengthening the Ombudsman's independence weakens the government. Yet the opposite is true: a government held to account by an independent institution is a government legitimised by that institution.

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I speak of this reality not as a normative abstraction, but from the experience of an institution that makes it the framework for its daily actions. The City of Montreal, a metropolis within a North American federation, has established a system of governance for City Council officers that takes the Venice Principles seriously, both in letter and in spirit. Not because an international obligation compelled it to do so, but because the democratic maturity of a local government is measured, precisely, by its ability to establish countervailing powers over which it has no control.

Compliance with the Venice Principles is not the preserve of major capitals or centralised states. It is achievable wherever there is the political will to make it effective.

And it is precisely this political will that must be sought today.

Four concrete commitments together form the backbone of genuine compliance with the Venice Principles. None requires special resources. Each is a matter of political decision.

Firstly, enshrine Ombuds institutions in the constitution, rather than in ordinary legislation that can be amended by a simple majority.

Secondly, protect their budgets from discretionary reallocations by placing them directly under the authority of Parliament.

Thirdly, guarantee their irremovability through strict conditions for dismissal, requiring a qualified majority.

Fourthly, grant them *ex officio* powers, without which they remain blind to the violations suffered by those who do not even know that remedies exist.

These four commitments are the essence of the enabling environment that this panel has been called upon to examine. The resolution that this Assembly adopted by consensus less than eighteen months ago already charts the course; it is now a matter of moving, together, from encouragement to commitment.

And this framework, already put to the test, now faces two emerging challenges that the drafters of the Venice Principles in 2019 might not have anticipated with such clarity.

The first is algorithmic governance. Artificial intelligence does not merely produce new administrative decisions; it produces a new category of harm: one that stems from a system rather than an identifiable decision, and which, by its very nature, becomes almost impossible to challenge individually. The person who receives the letter I mentioned may never know whether they were rejected by a civil servant or by a predictive model. And it is precisely this lack of knowledge that makes a traditional appeal impossible.

The Venice Principles provide us with a decisive tool here: Principle 13, which enshrines *ex officio* powers. The modern Ombudsman can no longer be content with examining individual decisions. They must be able to investigate systems, their programming logic, their biases, and even their very opacity.

The second emerging challenge is that of global crises, whether they be climate-related, migration-related or security-related. They share a common feature: they increase the number of areas where the state acts in a state of emergency, and where procedural safeguards are the first to be sacrificed. The Venice Principles provide us with a constitutional argument to maintain, in times of crisis, that the protection of rights is not a variable to be adjusted.

One final observation before I hand over.

The Paris Principles have their own accreditation mechanism, entrusted to GANHRI, and no one would dispute that, over the past thirty years, it has transformed the landscape of national human rights institutions. The Venice Principles, however, are still awaiting theirs.

The IOI, with its more than 200 institutions in over 100 countries, is the largest repository of institutional knowledge on what sustains an Ombudsman office and what causes it to fail. We are ready to shoulder this responsibility, to guide institutions towards compliance, to publicly recognise those that achieve it, and to offer Member States a legitimate partner in the reform process.

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I set out this ambition before you in a measured manner, but without mincing my words: the international community needs a peer review mechanism for Ombudsman institutions, and the IOI is in a position to provide it.

This woman, in fact, exists in Montreal, in Nairobi, in Warsaw, in Bogotá. Whilst we deliberate, she waits.

The measure of what we are building does not lie in the elegance of our resolutions.

It lies in what happens – or does not happen – when that woman finally reaches out her hand.

If that hand meets a free, independent, protected institution, then everything we do here takes on meaning.

If not, we will have produced, with great care, some very beautiful documents.

Thank you.

Conclusion

Madam Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

During this discussion, we have heard perspectives from every continent which, I believe, confirm one essential point: the Venice Principles are not a Western debate. They are a universal grammar of institutional independence, read and applied by States with diverse legal traditions, distinct democratic histories and their own contextual challenges.

Allow me to conclude by offering three convictions that seem to me to emerge from this discussion.

Firstly: compliance with the Venice Principles is not a matter of institutional model. It is a matter of political will. The states that have complied have done so in very different contexts: parliamentary monarchies, federal republics, emerging democracies. What unites them is not their constitutional form. It is the decision, at a specific moment in their history, to protect a countervailing power over which they have no control.

Secondly: the current international climate is not one in which we can postpone this decision. Democracies are under pressure. Oversight institutions are being undermined. Civic spaces are shrinking. And yet, all over the world, citizens continue to believe that somewhere there is an institution that will listen to them, that will investigate without fear, that will speak out without permission. This belief – fragile, precious, indispensable – cannot survive without the active commitment of the States that founded this Organisation.

Thirdly: the international community now has everything it needs to move to the next stage. The normative framework exists: the Venice Principles. Multilateral recognition exists: the resolution adopted by consensus in December 2024. The global professional network exists: the IOI, with its 200 institutions across every continent. What remains to be built is the mechanism that transforms these elements into an effective obligation. The IOI is ready to play its part in this project.

I shall conclude with an image.

At the headquarters of this Organisation, as you know, stands the sculpture *Non-Violence*, that revolver with its barrel knotted around itself. But what this sculpture truly represents is not the absence of force. It is force tamed by the law.

Ombudsman institutions are, in their own way, this living sculpture. We are proof that a State can be powerful enough to assert itself over its citizens, and mature enough to accept being questioned by them. This maturity, this ability to tie the barrel of its own authority, is what the Venice Principles protect.

Let us protect them in return.

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Thank you.