

## PRESS RELEASE

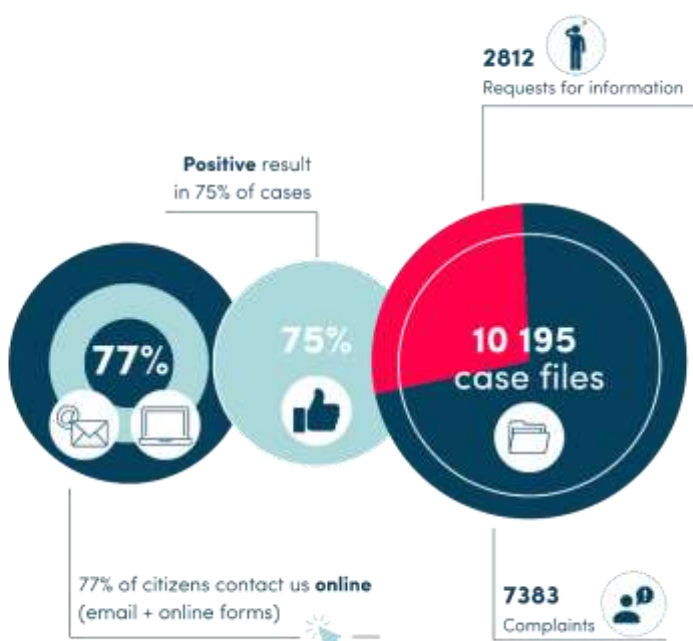
### Wednesday 24 April 2024

#### The Federal Ombudsman calls for strengthening the trust of citizens

- Having a right to an energy bonus but having to wait a long time to receive it;
- Needing a document to receive compensation after a fire, but not receiving it due to an IT bug on the part of the civil service;
- Ticking the wrong box on a form and being refused a visa;
- Losing several months of unemployment benefits due to a civil service delay;

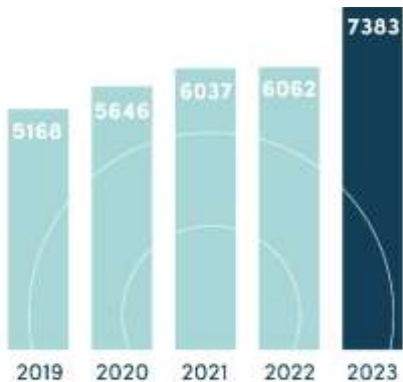
These are some of the 10,000 problems for which citizens contacted the Federal Ombudsman in 2023. Today (24 April 2024), the Federal Ombudsman is presenting its annual report to the Chamber of Representatives. It underlines a number of problems that are affecting the trust of citizens in public authorities and calls for a strengthening of this trust. *“Citizens should not have to bear the brunt of the new challenges and problems that public services are faced with”,* says Federal Ombudsman Jérôme Aass.

#### The threshold of 10,000 case files crossed



2023 was a record year for the Federal Ombudsman. It opened no fewer than **10,195 case files**: 7,383 complaints and 2,812 requests for information.

#### INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS OVER 5 YEARS



This upward trend in complaints received has been observed for several years. **In five years, the Federal Ombudsman has dealt with a 45% increase in complaints.** This is the result of **successive crises**:

- The coronavirus crisis has led to a wave of complaints concerning unemployment benefits;
- Wars and humanitarian crises have put pressure on the asylum and migration services and have led to increased complaints pertaining to this sector;
- Energy bonuses, which the government put in place to keep energy prices at an affordable level during the crisis, gave rise to over 1,700 complaints in 2023. **A quarter of complaints in 2023 concerned these energy bonuses** Never before had the Federal Ombudsman received so many complaints on the same subject.

For 75% of the complaints received, the Federal Ombudsman was able to find a solution for the citizen. In general, citizens contact the Federal Ombudsman most often to complain about having to wait too long to receive a response or a decision (44% of complaints handled).

The Federal Ombudsman is not limited to handling individual complaints. They also make recommendations seeking to resolve similar problems encountered by a certain number of people or to avoid them happening in the future. It is in this context that they sent the "**Energy Bonuses Report**" to the Federal Parliament and to the SPF Economy. In this report, they list the problems encountered in the allocation of energy bonuses. They hope that the government will learn the necessary lessons to do better during any future crisis measures.

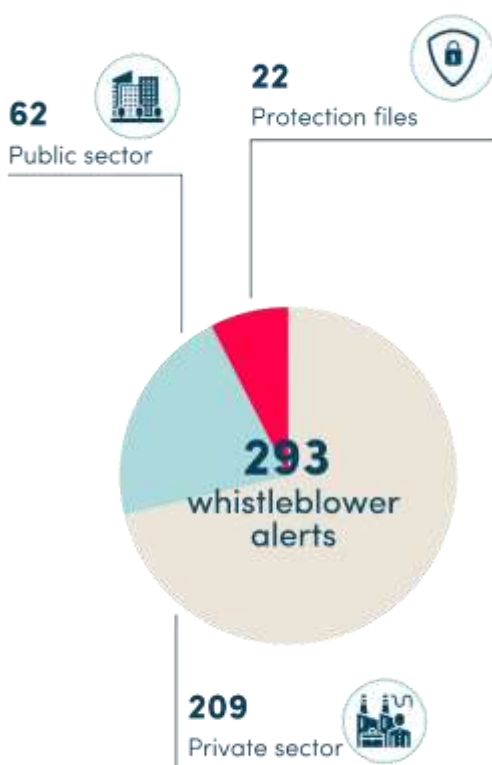
#### Strengthening trust

It is not only the number of complaints that has struck the Federal Ombudsman, it is also their reasons. **The trust of citizens in public authorities is of primordial importance for our democracy. The Federal Ombudsman was created to rebuild this trust.** They hear the discontent of citizens through complaints pertaining to the actions and functioning of the public service and seek solutions with the civil service. In recent years, citizens have been faced with new challenges. They are looking for support from the government, but for some public service administrations, it was increasingly difficult to provide quality service due to the elevated workloads and new challenges they are faced with. As a result, a number of citizens risk losing trust in public authorities and, over the long term, in democracy.

Based on the case files it has received, the Federal Ombudsman has formulated the following points of consideration to strengthen trust:

- **Public authorities must be able to keep the promises that have been made. To do so, public services must be stress resistant.** The Federal Ombudsman can understand that public service administrations are working in difficult and urgent situations as a result of successive crises. But citizens must not be the victims of this.
- **Public service administrations must make their digital applications secure and user friendly.** Digitalization offers a number of undeniable advantages. But some citizens need personal contact and the number of phishing cases worries them. Moreover, the Federal Ombudsman continues to receive complaints about IT bugs, a lack of clarity due to standardized responses, a lack of accessibility, and more.
- **A public service must above all be able to fix its errors itself.** A solid frontline complaint service is worth its weight in gold when it comes to having a good trust-based relationship between the citizen and the public service administration.
- **Public services must communicate openly and transparently.** Information that is clear and correct is important, as is proactive communication. Citizens could be more understanding if they knew why something was not working or that they would have to wait longer.

## Whistleblowers



The number of case files concerning whistleblowers also increased strongly in 2023 as a result of the widening of the Federal Ombudsman's jurisdiction. **They dealt with 293 whistleblower case files:** 62 of these files concerned suspicions concerning breaches of integrity (fraud, favouritism, abuse, etc.) within federal public services and 209 of these files concerned violations of legislation in the private sector.

Indeed, since 2023, the Federal Ombudsman has also had the jurisdiction to receive whistleblower alerts concerning legal violations in the private sector. The Federal Ombudsman examines the admissibility of these alerts and sends them, provided they are admissible, to the competent authorities so that an investigation can be carried out. Something else that is new since 2023: whistleblowers can also make their reports anonymously. This was done so in 74 cases (9 in the public sector and 65 in the private sector).

In both sectors, the Federal Ombudsman has protected whistleblowers from reprisals. They opened 22 protection files in 2023.

To read the annual report and the summary:

- Read a summary of the 2023 annual report

- Read the full 2023 annual report

### **About the Federal Ombudsman**

The Federal Ombudsman is an independent public institution that examines, free of charge, citizen complaints regarding federal public services. It resolves individual problems, carries out impartial investigations and ensures that the rights of citizens are respected. Through its recommendations, it offers to make improvements to the operations of public services and laws. It also carries out investigations of whistleblower accusations concerning fraud, breaches of trust and violations in federal public organizations and in companies and protects whistleblowers. The institution has existed for over 25 years and is directed by two federal ombudsmen: Jérôme Aass and David Baele. The institution has around 50 employees.

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