The Price of a Relationship

Censorship, Democratic Erosion, and the Limits of EU Accountability

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Response to the European Ombudsman's Decision
Case OI/4/2024/MIK

DEMOS — Centre for Democracy, Creativity and Social Inclusion
October 2026

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A Case Study Originating in Guinea-Bissau

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Executive Summary

Democratic erosion rarely announces itself. It spreads — beyond borders, through institutions, one quiet accommodation at a time. This paper documents how the EU's own commitments to freedom of expression, academic independence, and democratic accountability were set aside in West Africa, and how the institution charged with preventing that ratified it instead. The European Commission suppressed, for political reasons, a research initiative it had contracted in the service of democracy; the European Ombudsman, after an unusual own-initiative inquiry, found no maladministration. On ample evidence and sustained reasoning, this paper argues that the Decision was fundamentally flawed, and that it sets a worrisome precedent.

The Case

DEMOS — Centre for Democracy, Creativity and Social Inclusion — carried out the Voices of the People initiative in Guinea-Bissau between 2018 and 2022, with EU financial support. The project produced the country's first national public opinion study and an edited volume, both contracted for publication and dissemination. Censorship began in November 2021, and four years of obstruction and refused mediation followed. The Ombudsman's acceptance of the case in July 2024 was itself unusual — an exception made in the public interest, given the gravity of the human rights allegations. A year later, under a new Ombudsman, the Decision closed the inquiry with no remedy and no finding on the censorship question.

Context

Background is essential to understanding both the censorship and its significance. Guinea-Bissau under President Umaro Sissoco Embaló was sliding fast into autocratic rule, its state deeply corrupt and its political elite enmeshed in narcotrafficking. Embaló himself, once Gaddafi's emissary in West Africa, openly admired strongmen — Putin and Trump among them. Yet in the very period the suppression was imposed and maintained, senior European External Action Service (EEAS) officials chose proximity over distance: they cultivated a personal relationship with him.

Part I — The Original Wrong

Part I establishes that the censorship was a political act, and that the inquiry abandoned the human rights grounds on which it had been opened.

Point 1: The suppression followed a private meeting between the EEAS Managing Director for Africa, Rita Laranjinha, and President Embaló. This was no administrative irregularity but a deliberate political act — sustained through four documented patterns of restriction, from overt prohibition to oblique restrictions.

Point 2: The censorship engaged fundamental rights — academic freedom and freedom of expression for DEMOS and its scholars, and the right of Guinea-Bissau's citizens to the

knowledge commissioned in their name. The inquiry opened on those grounds, then closed without a finding on any of them.

Part II — A Compromised Investigation

Part II examines how the investigation failed in both method and analysis. The inquiry was not diligent: it heard one side, left key evidence unexamined, and closed without answering the questions it had itself posed.

Point 3: It heard the Commission at length but never properly interviewed DEMOS, and questioned no officer who had administered the contract or ordered the halt. The Commission refused mediation provided for in the contract and closed every avenue short of litigation — knowing Belgian courts were beyond a small NGO's reach. The inquiry neither examined this nor asked whether the Commission had acted in good faith.

Point 4: Key documents demonstrating that the Commission knew the obligation to publish the study was real and binding were not examined. The type of agreement used — a service contract rather than a grant, a distinction central to the dispute — was accepted without independent analysis. The inquiry found fault, yet offered no remedy.

Part III — Conceptual Error

Part III exposes the conceptual error at the heart of the Commission's defence — one the Ombudsman accepted without scrutiny.

Point 5: The Commission claimed the study was a "public good" and therefore could not be sold. The Ombudsman accepted the claim without scrutiny. It is a category error: public funding does not equal public access. The EU's own open science framework contradicts the Commission's position. Nor did the Decision ask whether a less restrictive option existed. Worse, in its reply to the Ombudsman, the Commission entrenched the error. It now instructs the staff who manage its external-action contracts that free distribution is "mandatory" for any study they commission — and is making its ownership of every such study more explicit. The rule that silenced this study is now taught as procedure.

Part IV — Impact

Part IV traces the consequences at three levels: the project, Guinea-Bissau, and the EU itself.

Point 6: Four years of obstruction damaged the work of ten scholars, kept the study from its intended audiences, and cut short a model of democracy research designed to be replicated in Africa and beyond.

Point 7: The suppression exposed the EU's acquiescence to autocratization in Guinea-Bissau — a disposition not to disturb relations with a government dismantling a precarious democracy. The choice undercut the EU's credibility as a defender of democracy and lowered the cost of regime repression. That repression deepened with the coup of 26

November 2025 — the moment a regime subverted its own citizens' verdict at the ballot box — and has worsened since.

Point 8: The Decision normalises a class of conduct — the use of contractual power to suppress inconvenient knowledge — and sends a signal across the institution. An Ombudsman who ratifies democratic erosion is not a check on it but its normaliser.

Closing

The test of democratic institutions is not what they declare but what they make visible. By that test, this case is a failure of democratic accountability at every level where accountability was meant to operate. The questions it raises remain open. What harms democracy abroad harms democracy at home.

The full paper: vozesdopovo.org