

Communication between SAIs and citizens to improve public accountability

A Summary of the Presentation by Jacek Jezierski,
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Communication has become an issue of vital importance in the modern world, also for Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs), whose task is to provide the public opinion with information on the condition of the state. Therefore, by communicating the results of their work to citizens via the media, SAIs add to public accountability. Obviously, the role of the media in the process cannot be ignored, as the media are the main source of information for citizens. Since INTOSAI recognises the importance of communication, which has been a topical issue within the organisation for many years, it is also a matter of vital importance to its Regional Working Groups. To discuss the issue in a narrower aspect and in a narrower circle, a seminar was organised in May 2011 by EUROSAI Presidency, dedicated to communication between SAIs and the public opinion via the media. The event was addressed to persons responsible for communication in European SAIs (such as media officers and spokespersons), and its objective was to approach the issues related to communication from the perspective of SAIs' specifics (a brief description of the content of the seminar and its main conclusions).

In the global community of SAIs, two main attitudes towards communication can be observed. The first attitude, which may be referred to as the "traditional" one, consists in cherishing the SAIs' specifics, preserving the professional jargon of their reports, and ignoring the requirements that information should meet to be "catchy". SAIs that take this attitude do not strive for being present in the media, believing that those interested in the results of their work can get to know them anyhow. The other attitude recognises the importance of communicating the SAIs' findings in the media. SAIs that take this attitude believe that by cooperating with journalists, by having trained spokespersons and by presenting their work in an accessible manner, they can reach the public opinion more effectively.

It seems that the other attitude should be supported, as several advantages of communication with citizens via the media can be identified, such as, for instance, disclosing

irregularities and potential risks (a preventive measure), adding to public accountability and, primarily, helping civil societies to take informed decisions to rule democratic countries.

Cooperation with the media is not an easy thing, though. The media must remain independent in democracies, and cannot be “bent” to meet the needs of SAIs. SAIs need to change their attitudes and to be more flexible in order to make cooperation with the media effective. Experiences presented by representatives of the media sector during the seminar on communication, and conclusions that should be drawn from those experiences could be useful here.

However, in order to make the media interested in their work, SAIs must provide high quality materials that can be used by journalists and that are attractive to the public. It is another challenge for SAIs, which need to audit topical issues and to develop high quality audit reports.