

Speech by Jacek Jezierski, President of the Supreme Audit Office of Poland
Communication between SAIs and citizens to improve public accountability
1st ASOSAI-EUROSAI Conference, Istanbul 22-23 September 2011

Dear Mr Cemil Çiçek, Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey,

Dear Dr. Recai Akyel, President of the Turkish Court of Accounts,

Dear Mr Aneece Marghoob, Auditor-General of Pakistan and Chairman of ASOSAI,

Dear Mr d'Oliveira Martins, President of the Tribunal de Contas of Portugal and Chairman of EUROSAI,

Dear Dr. Kun Yang, Chairman of the Board of Audit and Inspection of Korea and Secretary General of ASOSAI,

Dear Mr Nunez, President of the Spanish Court of Audit and EUROSAI Secretary General,

Dear Chairs and Secretaries General of the other INTOSAI Regional Working Groups,

Dear Colleagues, Heads of the delegations to the 1st ASOSAI-EUROSAI Conference,

Dear Members of the Delegations,

Dear Distinguished Guests and Colleagues,

It is an honour for me to participate in the first ASOSAI-EUROSAI conference. In my speech, I will try to show you that communication between SAIs and citizens, if effective, can be a key means to improve public accountability.

At present we live in the information society, and so communication has become an issue of vital importance, also for SAIs, whose task is to provide citizens with information on the condition of their states. However, the point is not just to **inform** citizens, by saying “Your money is spent well. Full stop”. SAIs need to **cooperate** with citizens. And in order to cooperate successfully, we must communicate effectively. And such communication is possible if, and only if, it is a two-way process, as its key aspect is feedback.

The public audit sector does not need to copy the conduct of the private sector. It is, however, useful to observe the processes that take place there. And then we will see a very interesting tendency, namely the growing number of communication experts in private companies. So we can conclude that good communication with the public opinion is one of the biggest, most demanding and most urgent challenges that all organisations have to face.

As I have already said, the most important task of SAIs is to depict the condition of the state. It is a great challenge and a huge responsibility. By auditing how public resources are used, we assess how others perform their tasks for the public. Let me, however, stress that this process has two aspects. We report on other institutions, public organisations, offices, ministries, and so on. But we cannot forget that we also have to report on how **we** perform **our** tasks, and how **we** spend resources that **we** are entrusted with. In our reports, we also say: “Dear Citizens, we spend the money that you give us wisely.” But this information is not only about accounting for public funds. It is more than prevention, too, although prevention is an important reason for communicating with the public opinion. Because information on irregularities in one area can contribute to eliminating them in another.

Since the assessment of the condition of the state is so important, and due to the double role that SAIs play, both as those that do audits, and as those that are accountable themselves, they cannot simply **inform** or **report**, as these are one-way processes. So after publication of information on our findings, we should expect a reaction. It can vary: these may be letters, complaints or conclusions, or results of opinion polls. Whatever its form, feedback is a must. We will know then, what effect our information has, we can explain things, and prevent misinterpretations. Comments and questions received as feedback are both a gift and a challenge. They can inspire, show areas which should be audited – which are close to our citizens and their problems. And then we really participate in the communication process which goes two ways.

But how can communication improve public accountability? Public accountability could be briefly defined as “the obligation to explain and justify conduct”. As Professor Mark Bovens puts it: “this involves not just the provision of information about performance, but also the possibility of debate, of questions by the forum and answers by the actor”. So we arrive at communication, which requires SAIs to take up a new role: the role of institutions that not only audit and inform,

but also, or rather in the first place, explain – that is actively participate in the communication process.

The mandates of our institutions precisely define the addressees of our reports: these are usually parliaments and governments. However, the word “public” indicates one more addressee, namely citizens, whose position is, of course, different, but I dare to say that it is no less important. If SAIs ignore this addressee, they make communication limited to a one-way process, and then it is not **communicating** any longer, and becomes just mere **informing**. And this is not what we should strive for.

But what is the basic reason for audit bodies to communicate with citizens?

Communication between public institutions and the society makes one of the pillars of democracy. Citizens who jointly govern the state must be **informed** in order to take **informed** decisions. A civil society are not the inhabitants of a state ruled **by** officials. It is a civil society who rules the state, **through** its officials. Information on the results of our audits, and information on our functioning, is just a small package of data that a civil society needs to take decisions. Officials’ task is to execute these decisions, auditors are to check how officials do their job, while the society is to govern the state, and so it needs information. And it is our duty, and our privilege, to provide this information. We want to reach the public opinion, because we feel co-responsible for the state. And the only restriction, yet a very important one, is sensitive data or any other kind of confidential information.

Last May in Warsaw, I had the honour to open a EUROSAI seminar dedicated to communication between SAIs and the public opinion via the media. The seminar was targeted at persons responsible in European SAIs for communication policy. It was attended by participants from 21 SAIs. Its main objective was to discuss the communication process from both the perspective of SAIs and that of the media, as well as to consider how communication between SAIs, the media and the public opinion could be improved. In order to find the perspective of the media, we invited journalists to share their experience in cooperation with SAIs, so that we could identify some lessons to learn.

But let us see first how communication is approached by SAIs. In the global audit community, two main attitudes can be observed. The first attitude, which may be referred to as the “traditional” one, consists in ignoring the relations with the media and their role in the communication

process. It relies on cherishing the SAIs' specifics and on preserving the professional jargon of their reports. SAIs that take this attitude consider themselves experts, and this shows that they understand communication as a one-way persuasion process. They believe that they do not need the media. If journalists say that audits present issues that are no longer topical, and that audit subjects are not interesting, their answer is: "Bad luck! Journalists are not to decide what we should audit. We audit areas that cover several years, so they must take a long time. If the media want to understand us, they should employ experts. And we will keep on publishing our serious reports on our serious website. Somebody may read them one day."

The other approach, so different from the one I have just presented, is based on the assumption that by informing the media, SAIs do not communicate **with the media**, but in fact they communicate **with the public**. The media are just a means to reach the public opinion, a transmission belt so to speak. Of course, we do have the internet, we do meet MPs, we do send them our reports, but sending a report to the Parliament, or publishing it on our website does not necessarily mean that somebody will read it. The media raise important issues. They provoke discussion.

So the modern media, which appear to be so distant from our everyday activity, can help SAIs keep up with the modern world. This attitude, however, requires SAIs to make a lot of effort, as it seems that the goals of journalists and those of SAIs are totally different. Auditors generate long, elaborated reports, while journalists need short and 'catchy' pieces of news. Auditors employ professional jargon, stuffed with specialist terms, while journalists use straightforward language of news. Auditors have a long audit process to comply with, while journalists must keep their services topical, they must have information 'now', and 'later' is much too late for them.

Naturally, SAIs cannot adjust completely to satisfy the needs of journalists – this is not the point. As I have already said, the media are just a means, and not a target as such. And it is beyond doubt that it is SAIs, which are independent bodies, to decide on **what, how** and **when** should be audited. And they also must remain independent in deciding on when and how the public is informed about audit findings. However, the very manner of providing information must be changed, and the SAIs should accept it, being aware that to stand still is to move back. That is why we need to improve communication, and through communication – we can enhance public accountability.

Now, let me focus on several issues that, in my opinion, are important for communicating with the public. In order to encourage journalists to present our materials in the media, these materials must be of high quality. The participants in the Warsaw seminar last May agreed that media officers are not to make audit reports more attractive and more colourful if they are boring, if their findings are far-fetched, or if their conclusions are inaccurate. No. Audit reports **should** be of high quality to be interesting to the public. What can be done to add to their quality? Let me identify three important issues:

- Firstly, it is the selection of audit subjects. They must be chosen carefully, and touch upon matters that are important for citizens. Naturally, SAIs are not able to audit everything, and they must, of course, audit some areas that are not topical or catchy. But apart from that, SAIs should audit issues that the public finds interesting, that are close to citizens, to their everyday life.
- Secondly, information presented in audit reports must be topical. SAIs must attempt to present audit findings in the perspective of no more than several months. SAIs are not historians or archivists. If audit reports are to contribute to the improvement of the state, SAIs must be able to react quickly.
- And the third issue is the language, which I have already talked about. I believe that our reports should be written in a clear, accessible manner. Even if a report contains specialist contents, we can always prepare a brief synthesis, written in a readable way. Then, communication may be easier and faster. And more effective.

Finally, please let me reflect on one more matter. Do SAIs really need to present results of their work in the media? We do not have to, and we do not want to be present in the media at all costs. But the truth is that an organisation that is absent from the media – disappears. I can imagine that the media and the public opinion will somehow manage without SAIs. But if we want to actively participate in the public debate, being absent from the media and the public opinion is not an option.

At the end of my presentation, let me once again stress, that in order to enhance public accountability, we, as SAIs, need to cooperate with citizens. And to do so, we should communicate with them effectively. So we should listen to them, because their feedback is a starting point for our further work. When we listen to feedback carefully, and react properly, we can lead to better public accountability.