

Lilia Zaharia-Cravcenco, Executive Director of Transparency International-Moldova, member of the Public Procurement Monitoring Coalition: Legislative shortcomings in public procurement can create corruption risks

Transparency International-Moldova is a Chisinau-based non-governmental organization whose mission is to stop corruption and promote transparency, accountability and integrity at all levels and in all sectors of society. The project that TI-Moldova, in partnership with IDIS Viitorul and PTF, is implementing as of September 1, 2023, is aimed at exposing irregularities and abuses in procurement procedures carried out by the Chisinau City Hall and municipal enterprises. Lilia Zaharia-Cravcenco, executive director of TI-Moldova, member of the Coalition for Monitoring Public Procurement, led by IDIS Viitorul, answered a few questions related to public procurement in the sector they have set out to monitor:

- *First of all, we would like you to briefly report on the experience your organization has in the field of public procurement. What was your previous involvement?*

In Moldova's experience, civil society and the investigative press have identified corruption, cases of abuse, or lack of transparency in the public procurement process. As a journalist who has covered issues in this area, but also from TI-Moldova's experience, public procurement is shaky and unbalanced, so fact-based reporting is essential.

- *What led you to apply to the second round of the grant competition for civil society organizations in the field of public procurement monitoring?*

The subject of public procurement is always topical because of the significant impact that procurement has on the economy and the need to ensure transparency and efficiency in the spending of public resources. We are in an election year, with local general elections taking place, and we have been motivated to monitor municipal procurement. Voters are interested in how public money is spent. Candidates can promise to optimize procurement processes to ensure that taxpayers' money is used efficiently.

- *Public procurement has recently become, along with other sectors of the economy, vulnerable to corruption. Why do you think this is happening? How important is it for non-governmental organizations to keep public procurement procedures in their sights?*

Corruption in public procurement is a complex phenomenon, which is why we can't just pin it on one pretext. Firstly, it is caused by a lack of transparency and accountability. When procurement processes are not sufficiently transparent and accountable, "loopholes" are created for illicit activities: from rigging tenders, to overpricing or simulating evaluation procedures. Another factor is the weak law governing public procurement, which can create opportunities for corruption. Monitoring of public procurement procedures by non-governmental organizations is extremely important as it ensures transparency and integrity. Public procurement procedures must be transparent and fair to ensure that public resources are used efficiently and for the benefit of citizens. NGOs can play a key role in bringing to public attention possible abuses or irregularities in this area.

- *What will you monitor in the coming period at the level of the municipal institutions that have been selected for monitoring?*

TI-Moldova aimed to monitor the procurement procedures planned by the Chisinau City Hall and some municipal enterprises for the second half of this year, as well as to analyze how some procedures were carried out in the first quarter of next year. After this monitoring, a report will be drawn up specifying the deficiencies found in the public procurement process carried out by the monitored entities and proposals for remedying the situation. Chisinau City Hall has adopted a local anti-corruption plan for 2022-2025, and the report will also contain a paragraph analysing how the commitments made in the area of public procurement were implemented. It will also focus on the implementation of the recommendations of the Court of Auditors on procurement.

- *At the end of the monitoring procedures, how do you plan to inform the monitored authorities of any violations or abuses?*

In my experience as a journalist, of course, a powerful tool to raise public awareness is to mediate issues through journalistic investigations. We will organize a debate to which both journalists and representatives of the institutions concerned in the monitoring process will be invited. At the same time, in order to publicize the issue of public procurement irregularities at the national level, it is proposed to broadcast a radio program where the protagonists involved in the monitoring process will also be invited. A press conference will be organized as part of the project to increase visibility. Thus, the results of the monitoring, the journalistic investigations will be publicized through the media.

- *What would you like to see happen at the level of municipal institutions as a result of the final monitoring process?*

Our civil society knows and can investigate problems in public procurement through in-depth investigations, objective reporting, use of relevant data and statistics, and public involvement in monitoring these processes. At the municipal level, we want monitoring to put a strong emphasis on ethics and integrity in public procurement processes, drawing attention to cases of corruption or abuse. Last but not least, we want to encourage the public to become more involved in the monitoring and evaluation of public procurement, to demand accountability from the authorities and to support the necessary reforms.