

## **Research on the Perception of Public Interest in the Area of Preventing and Combating Corruption**

The research study “Perception of public interest in the area of preventing and combating corruption” was carried out by the ACA within the project “Fight against corruption and the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Agency” – IPA 2008. The research was conducted from March to June 2012, within the following target groups: public authorities, the media, citizen associations, and citizens.

The research was conducted with the purpose of establishing a database of information necessary for the development of the Anti-Corruption Agency’s strategic plan. The Law on the Anti-Corruption Agency conferred upon this institution a mandate to develop a wide range of different anti-corruption policies, along with mechanisms for their implementation. These require in-depth development and planning, which is to be achieved through an internal strategic work plan. In order to make the planning and implementation of the ACA’s competences effective, it is necessary to determine the attitudes, opinions and expectations of various public target groups regarding the subject of corruption in general, as well as the place and role of the ACA in preventing and combating corruption. The research was conducted on target groups comprising public authority, media and NGO representatives, with an emphasis on determining the place and role of each of the mentioned target groups in the process of preventing and combating corruption, as well as cooperation with the ACA in the given area.

### **PUBLIC AUTHORITIES**

#### **Understanding corruption and public interest**

A quarter of civil servants (25%) are tolerant of the use of personal connections and acquaintances with citizens, which allows the citizens to exercising certain rights outside the regular procedures and rules. Such behavior amounts to misuse of public powers to decide in one (arbitrary) way or another, that is to say, to meet the interests of one party at the possible expense of another, who has no connections among civil servants in the institution. In addition, there is a relatively high degree of tolerance in the case of conflict of interest and incompatibility of offices, whether it is the case of various public offices, or public and private ones.

The prevailing view in the target group comprised of public authority representatives is that any instance of corruption must include “two sides” – two thirds of respondents (66%) believe that citizens and civil servants are equally to blame for the occurrence of corruption. In addition, it has been found that a majority of respondents believe “the entire system is set up in such a manner as to cause corruption” (56%). Therefore, it may be concluded that the representatives of the public sector believe corruption is caused by individuals – citizens and civil servants – who use the existing system of norms, rules, and regulations (or the lack thereof) in order to obtain a private benefit at the expense of public resources.

This research confirms the findings of other research carried out in Serbia, revealing that corruption is seen as a very widespread social problem. In this case, 77% of civil servants believe corruption is the biggest problem facing society, while 19% disagree with this view.

The target group comprised of public sector representatives believes that the main causes of corruption are the influence of political decisions on the work of institutions and the

bureaucratic cause, manifested in the existence of a large number of procedures which are an obstacle to exercising citizens' rights and obligations and thus leave a broad "gray area" which allows sidestepping the procedures through corrupt practices in order to speed up proceedings. Civil servants fail to see the extent to which some (expected) issues favor the occurrence of corruption; this refers, first and foremost, to the lack of transparency in the work of institutions, and the existence of excessively broad discretionary powers in decision-making.

Most respondents believe that "public interest" is something that concerns all members of a community, i.e., that is universal enough to affect the wellbeing of every individual (62%). Nevertheless, the number of those who equate public interest with state interest (11%) is not negligible, either; nor is the number of those who consider it the interest of a small number of people who run the country and "know" what public interest is (10%). The majority of respondents believe the fight against corruption is of great or crucial importance to the public interest.

### **Anti-corruption methods**

More than three quarters of respondents from the public sector (77%) believe prevention is a better method for combating corruption than suppression. This does not mean suppression or punishment is considered less important, but that in comparison of the two methods, prevention is seen as more effective.

The fact that civil servants predominantly believe there is lack of cooperation among institutions regarding the fight against corruption is important to the future work of the ACA. Although it was determined that the public comprised of civil servants considers prevention to be a more efficient method than suppression, this does not mean that sanctioning is not important, as 71% of respondents believe corruption can also be eradicated by severe penalties of the perpetrators.

### **Perception of the Anti-Corruption Agency**

One half of civil servants get their information on the ACA from the media (49%); that is to say, they get most of their knowledge on ACA's work from what the media report about it. This is an important fact from the point of view of public relations, because it proves that it is very important for the ACA to take care of the manner, frequency and content of the messages it communicates to the media.

The prevailing view among civil servants is that the ACA represents and protects the public interest (84%), that it is open to the public (78%), and that it is able to identify real problems (77%). The majority of respondents believes that the founding and the work of the ACA has led to positive outcomes in the fight against corruption (69%), although, in this case as well, close to one third of them disagree or do not know anything about it; 60% of respondents believe that the people working at the ACA are professionals, but in this case, one third of the interviewees (34%) responded with "I do not know". The public is divided between those who agree that the ACA is capable of carrying out its competences and resisting political pressure, and those who either disagree with this opinion, or do not have one. There are also areas where work needs to be done in order to gain the public's trust that the ACA can actually carry out and implement everything it stands for, and also resist political pressure.

Despite very good indicators in terms of the assessment of work outcomes, capacities, role and position of the ACA, a significant finding of the research suggests there are more civil servants who believe the ACA should introduce certain changes to its work (33%) than

those who consider all the work done so far does not require any changes (14%). Changes in the work primarily refer to indiscriminate exercise of competences, broadening of competences, “a more aggressive approach”, greater media presence, more transparency, and greater independence of work.

Most institutions view the anti-corruption mechanisms in the ACA’s competences as useful both for the fight against corruption and for the work and integrity of the institutions themselves (46%). However, the fact that almost a third of them (31%) believe that although such mechanisms ought to exist, their implementation will probably prove to be a greater challenge in the future. For this reason it is important to regain trust and point to specific benefits that could be obtained through the implementation of anti-corruption mechanisms.

## **MEDIA**

### **Understanding corruption and public interest**

Media representatives are considerably more critical toward public authority representatives than towards citizens when it comes to causes of corruption. Although a bit over a half of them (52%) see both sides as equally “guilty”, as much as 43% believe corruption is generated exclusively by public officials and civil servants, whereas only 5% hold the same view regarding citizens. This shows a significant presence of critical awareness in the media towards the public sector, at least at the level of *attitudes* identified in this research; whether and how such attitudes are implemented in practice, or in media reporting, is a question for a different sort of analysis, dealing with the position and status of the media in society.

Considering the power of the media in creating public opinion, overall it is very important to determine how public interest is perceived by media representatives. The perception of public interest will also condition the treatment of this issue on the part of the media, i.e. the direction of public opinion on this topic. There is no dilemma about what media representatives consider to be public interest – eight out of ten respondents in this group (80%) think that public interest is the interest of all members of a community.

The fact that more than half of the respondents in this target group (52%) believe they should have more information on the subject of corruption is also important for the ACA’s future activities, and shows the need for continuous cooperation with the media.

### **Anti-corruption methods**

Two thirds of media representatives (65%) believe prevention, (elimination of causes of corruption), is more important than suppression (punishing perpetrators of corrupt acts). On the other hand, a bit more than a third of respondents in this group chose suppression (35%).

When it comes to the engagement of institutions in the fight against corruption, media representatives have the least trust in courts, followed by individual institutions – as much as 30% of them believe these two entities contribute nothing at all, and another 50% believe they only partially contribute to the fight against corruption.

According to the perception of media representatives, three areas important to the fight against corruption are the oversight of political party financing, resolution of individual corruption cases, and action on complaints and reports, as well as implementing the Anti-Corruption Strategy and Action Plan. This finding may also suggest which anti-corruption areas are of greatest interest to the media, from the point of view of their monitoring and reporting on them.

## **Perception of the Anti-Corruption Agency**

Half of civil servants get their information on the work of the ACA from the media (49%). Research reveals that six out of ten interviewed journalists/editors think they are mostly well informed on the work and competences of the ACA. The response “mostly well informed” means they are informed to the extent that is necessary from the point of view of their work and the need for reporting on the ACA’s work, as well as on the issues it deals with; 12% of media representatives think they are very well informed, whereas 28% admit to being poorly informed. This finding indicates that obtaining information is not something that can be achieved completely, after which this activity may be ceased. Changes in the work of the ACA, changes in the social environment, and in the media, bring the need to continuously inform the public (especially the media) on anything of importance from the point of view of the ACA.

The majority of the media representatives interviewed (63%) had had contact with the ACA staff in the past (press conferences, telephone, email...). Those who had this contact were asked to assess their satisfaction or lack thereof with various elements of the communication. It was revealed that a large majority are satisfied with all elements tested. What still might need work and improvement is the speed of responses, i.e. the speed of providing information to journalists, as in this case dissatisfaction is somewhat higher than in others.

More than one half of media representatives (54%) think the ACA should make some changes regarding its work. Only 11% do not hold this opinion, whereas 35% said they did not have enough information to be able to decide.

### **Role of the media in the process of preventing and combating corruption**

Without a doubt, the media play a big part in the exposure of and fight against corruption. There are numerous examples of media reporting that started debates in public, raised concerns, and even exposed specific cases of corruption, and thus initiated actions on the part of public authorities that have continued to work on those cases. The media are quite aware of this fact, since as much as 95% of them consider that the media ought to play a certain part in preventing and combating corruption.

The idea that there is a lot of room for improvement in media reporting on corruption is confirmed by the finding that as many as 90% of the media representatives interviewed believe the media do not deal with this subject as much as it should.

Media representatives were very self-critical when assessing the quality of reporting on corruption. Up to 87% of respondents believe this reporting to be selective – that is to say, that certain criteria are used in order to choose which cases will or will not be reported on. More than three quarters of media representatives believe that the reporting on corruption is sensationalist (77%), and 63% that it is always initiated by someone with interests and not through analysis of social or any other needs for reporting on this subject.

Up to 95% of the media representatives interviewed believe the media and the Anti-Corruption Agency need to cooperate.

## **NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS**

### **Experience of non-governmental organizations so far in the implementation of projects in the area of the fight against corruption and cooperation with the public sector**

It is a cause for concern that up to one quarter of NGOs (25%) do not obtain funds from the public sector by way of open application procedures, but by sending *ad hoc* requests to public authorities, which then come to a decision on whether to grant the funds based on their discretionary powers. This not only leads to arbitrary spending of funds, but also places non-governmental organizations in an entirely unfair position, since funds are only granted to those knowing they may request them in this manner, or to those who have connections with heads of institutions and are able to ensure the money for their work is provided. This is how non-governmental organizations become part of a potential chain of corruption, instead of providing a barrier and control mechanism to prevent this type of phenomena. This is an especially frequent occurrence in local self-governments; they must precisely define the criteria for the allocation of funds to non-governmental organizations, and make these criteria known to the NGO sector.

### **Understanding corruption and public interest**

Use of connections with civil servants in public institutions by citizens is a form of behavior which is least considered to be corruption – 23% of NGO representatives do not view this type of relationship as corruption. Of the remaining areas investigated, conflict of interest and incompatibility of offices are somewhat tolerated (by more than 10% of respondents); likewise for the giving of presents to civil servants. All these areas require further raising of awareness among members of this target group about the (potentially) corrupt nature of such behavior.

Up to 81% of NGO representatives believe that lack of accountability and punishment of employees/managers for failures and abuses are very frequently causes of corruption; 78% think the cause is lack of transparency in the work of public institutions, and according to 77% it is the lack of oversight of employees' work. Therefore, the key causes of corruption according to the NGO sector are in the area of public sector work oversight, achieved through an assessment of work and a call for accountability and sanctions of employees for work failures. This also suggests this sector's likely readiness to engage in monitoring and oversight of public institutions' work.

From the point of view of potential civil sector engagement regarding the realization of anti-corruption projects, their knowledge about this subject, i.e., the amount of information they possess on the causes of and the methods for preventing and combating corruption, are important information. The majority of NGO representatives claim they do know something about corruption, but that this information is not sufficient, and they need to have more information (58%); a third of them believe they have enough information on corruption (32%), while only 10% say they know nothing about it.

### **Anti-corruption methods**

As in the case of other target groups, NGO representatives also believe that preventing corruption is a better and more efficient method than suppressing it, in the more narrow sense of the word – 76% opted for the former and 22% for the latter.

It is important to answer the question about the best way to organize the fight against corruption in the institutional sense of the word. NGO representatives' opinion is divided into two approximately equal halves in terms of responses to this question – those who believe all institutions should get equally involved in this area, and, conversely, those who believe that it would be better if only specialized institutions, such as those pertaining to the judiciary, the police and the Anti-Corruption Agency, were to deal with this issue.

In the opinion of NGO sector representatives, the most important area that needs to be dealt with if a real fight against corruption is to be undertaken is the oversight of political party financing – up to 65% of respondents from this sector attribute crucial importance and impact to this area, and 28% chose this area as the most important one among eight areas listed (chart 12). This finding is in complete agreement with the perception of political parties' power in terms of defining public interest and the need for greater control and public scrutiny of their activities. In that sense, non-governmental organizations may play a part in the oversight and monitoring of political parties' activities and become the ACA's partner in this process.

### **Perception of the Anti-Corruption Agency**

Research reveals that the NGO sector is relatively poorly acquainted with the activities of the Anti-Corruption Agency – more than one half of respondents (54%) say they have little knowledge of the ACA's activities, and another 11% have no knowledge at all. The possibilities for cooperation between the ACA and non-governmental organizations are far from being exhausted, and at any rate, thorough knowledge of the possibilities for cooperation is one of the basic prerequisites for further improvement of these relations.

Non-governmental organizations have a positive opinion about the Anti-Corruption Agency, which is revealed by the degree of agreement with positive statements regarding the ACA; 73% of respondents from this sector believe the ACA protects and represents the public interest, 66% think it is open to the public and able to determine real problems; 61% believe the ACA's activities have led to positive results in the fight against corruption.

The data on the perception of the results of the ACA's activities regarding changes in attitudes and behavior throughout society is rather discouraging. The majority of respondents from the NGO target group believe no changes have taken place either in citizens' behavior (78%), or in that of public officials (65%), since the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Agency.

### **Role of non-governmental organizations in preventing and combating corruption**

The largest number of civil sector respondents (65%) believe their key role lies in undertaking "watch-dog" activities, i.e., monitoring and evaluating the work of public authorities. This would provide an indirect treatment of the subject of corruption, by placing it within the context of good or bad management in public authorities, as well as public resources disposed of by said authorities, i.e. its managers and employees.

Education in the area of preventing and combating corruption occupies the second place as a potential subject for anti-corruption projects, with 57% of responses. More than half of NGO sector respondents see themselves as capable and ready to undertake education projects in this and other areas.

Other types of anti-corruption projects took the interest of less than half of the sampled organizations – for instance, 47% think that NGOs should provide assistance to citizens in exposing and processing corruption cases; 45% views the role of the civil sector in publicly representing and promoting solutions in this area, and almost as much (44%) in formulating and implementing public policies in the anti-corruption area. Least interest was shown for activities of publishing in this area (21%).

There is no doubt in the NGO sector as to its cooperation with the Anti-Corruption Agency – it is supported by 87% respondents from this target group.