

The External Public Audit of the Budgetary Programs – Preparatory Activities

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Abstract

Although performance audit allows greater freedom in choosing themes, The Supreme Audit Institutions select only those themes and entities which are likely to significantly contribute to performance improvement. When choosing the budget program that makes the object of the audit, we must take into consideration an analysis of the entire system or area of which it is part, in order to be able to make the most appropriate decision in terms of the efficiency of the audit work. The paper aims to research the functions of external audit by providing relevant information on financial and economic activity in the public sector. We tried to highlight the information that need to be taken into consideration when referring to the preparatory activities (preliminary stage) of an external audit and we made a case study regarding the preliminary activities of the audit for the National Agency for Fiscal Administration from Romania.

Key words: public audit, budget program, preliminary activities, external audit, budgetary programs
J.E.L. classification: E62, G28, G38, H6, M21, M42

1. Introduction

At present time, there is insufficient information related to the “public audit” topic. Public audit is usually being presented as a derivate branch of private audit. The legitimacy of the public audit can be achieved by promoting transparency, taking into account that it benefits from important resources. Also, one of its roles is to find justifications on how to use and assign public money (Heald, 2018).

The purpose of the paper is to present the external audit process in the public sector, ensuring an improvement of the decision-making process, documented on evidence, establishing recommendations for selecting appropriate decisions, correcting non-conformities discovered within the public institution, the result being optimal for all interested parties as well as for the society as a whole. Also the purpose of the paper is to analyze the legal basis on which the external audit is being practiced in the Romanian public sector. The responsibilities of the public authority were taken into account in order to produce a significant impact on the economic and social well-being.

The external audit for public sector institutions is performed by SAI (Kontogeorga, 2019). The Court of Accounts, as the supreme audit institution in Romania, performs the activity of external public audit. Its function is considered to be indispensable, guaranteeing the responsibility related to the administration of public money in legal and efficient conditions established by the budgetary laws (Bobes, 2010). Transparency related to government’s performance can increase confidence, but it can also have adverse effects, when the reported performance has not reached the goal initially set, the interpretation of results having unsatisfactory impact. This should not lead the public audit institutions to abandon their transparency objective, but to demonstrate their independence from the executive.

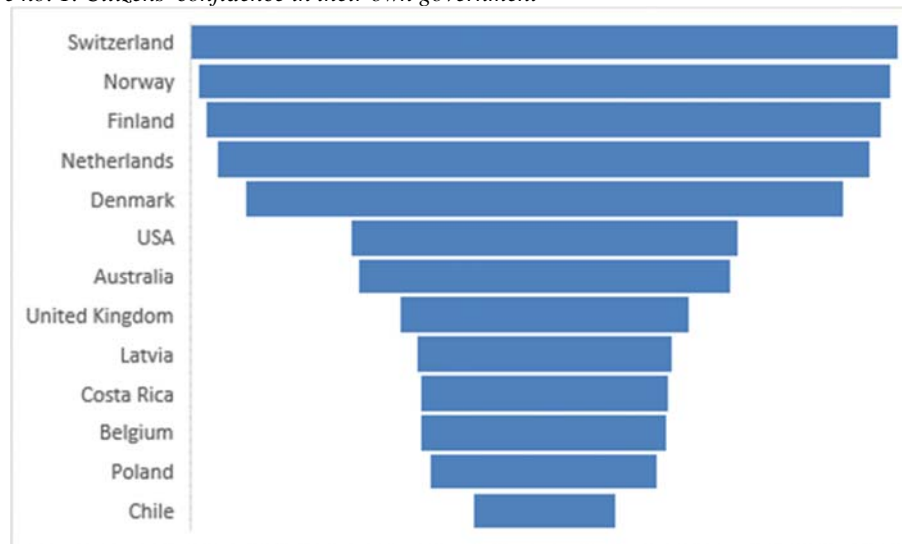
2. Literature review

The present research is based on academic works, published by the Institute of Scientific Information (ISI) Web of Knowledge data base in August 2021. We filtered the information guided by 2 key terms: "external audit" and "public sector". Thus, by reading the introductions of the initially found works, a number of articles outside of our research area were excluded, and the selected ones were systematized according to the chosen research topic.

We have also studied the legal regulations and websites of SAI (Supreme Audit Institutions). The literature analysis was performed by synthesizing information related to external auditing in the public sector, whose objective is the recognition of omissions, offering possible research directions in approaching external auditing in the public sector. The financial management of the efficiency and quality in a country is realized with the help of the decisive contribution of the SAI, which have acquired new approaches of the governmental audit with a significant impact on the control of public finances (Kontogeorga, 2019). Within the SAI, the legal regulation of the public sector audit has the capacity to present original approaches on public audit institutions, approaches that involve their independence and function.

As evidenced by a specialized study, the population confidence in its own government deteriorates as time passes, reaching 45% in most OECD (The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2021) countries and 65% in EU countries, this being an alarming signal considering that the private sector responds to public policies and contributes to the sustainable economic development of the country (Heald, 2018).

Figure no. 1. Citizens' confidence in their own government



Source: (processing after OECD, 2021 and European Commission, 2020)

Thus, in figure 1 we summarized the situation of the countries according to the degree of trust of the population in the government of the country. As we can see, the most credible governments are those of countries such as Switzerland, Norway, Finland, Netherlands and Denmark, with over 70% points of trust, and at the opposite pole with a weight of about 30% are countries such as: Chile, Poland, Belgium and Costa Rica. Romania has a score of about 30%, far below the European average, next to Serbia and Montenegro, Bulgaria etc.

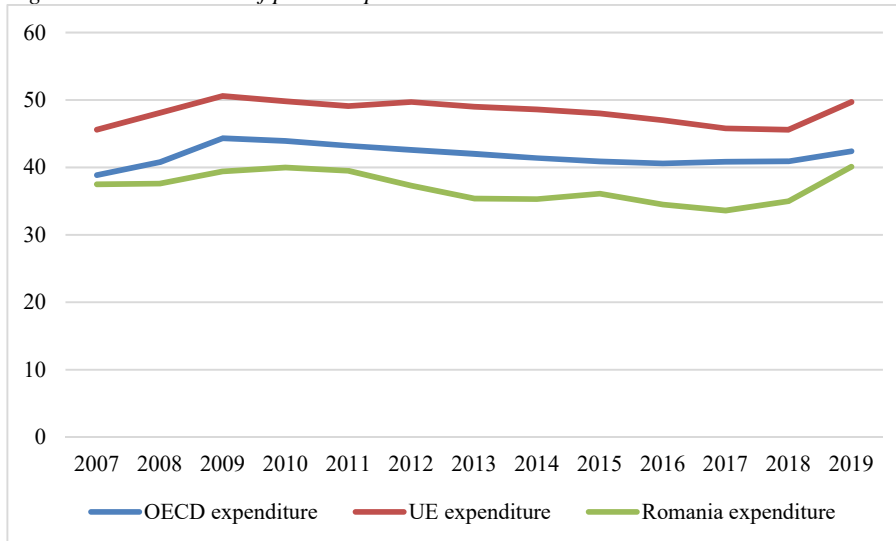
The integrity of public management is affected by inappropriate behaviors, among which we can mention: conflicts of interest, fraud, influence peddling, erroneous financial statements, bribery, etc., all with a significant impact on the society as a whole. This situations arise the need to eradicate these phenomena from the base.

A study conducted at European level indicates that the local sector allocates public spending on average of about one fifth of GDP (Gross Domestic Product), public procurement being more relevant given the budget constraints, high transparency and minimization of governmental

dimensions. As also stated by Marques central administration functions have been delegated to municipalities so the existence of an external audit is fundamental to be able to certify the relevance and correctness of the information provided by the municipalities.

In 2019, the public expenditures in Europe represented approximately 45% of the GDP, as seen in figure 2, almost half of these being made for the intelligent and favorable growth of inclusion, followed by sustainable growth and administration.

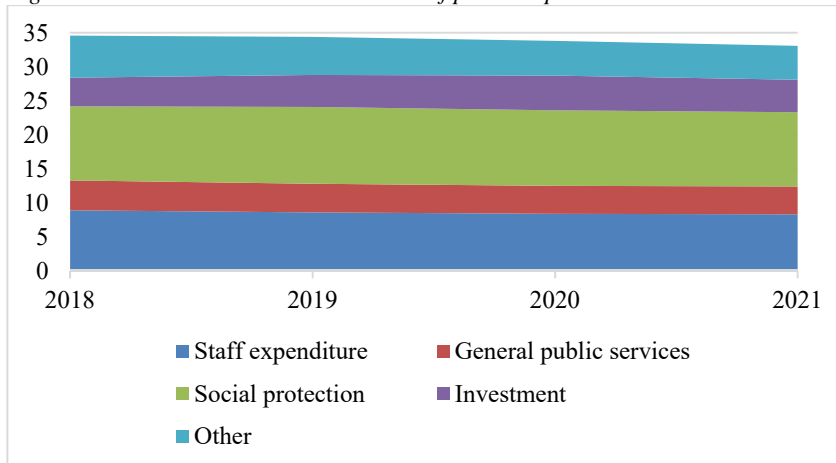
Figure no. 2. Evolution of public expenditures



Source: (processing after OECD, 2021 and European Commission, 2020)

In Romania, the government has made public expenditures in proportion of 35% of GDP, and it is expected that by 2021 they will reach 33.1% of GDP. The structure of these expenditures is summarized in figure 3.

Figure no. 3. The evolution and structure of public expenditures in Romania



Source: (processing after CDEP, 2018)

Heald (2018) highlight that the public audit is only part of this topic, given that government decisions are made internally. Public audit can only bring an interpretation of government performance. Thus, the confidence generated can be interpreted as an effect, but the promotion of transparency should be an aim we must achieve.

The auditor has the task of verifying the accuracy of the financial statements, proving the results achieved with the planned ones, also the compliance audit involves researching the existence of the authorized value and its use for the purposes provided above, while the performance audit implies the implementation of the government policy so that the taxpayers can obtain value for taxes paid (Isaksson et al. 2012).

Among the attributions of the audit we can also mention the ease of optimizing the results of the public administration, by using the effective measures made through creativity and cooperation to remedy the public difficulties (Meyer et al. 2019). The identification of areas characterized by high risk is interpreted different in specialized literature. This gives us reason to think that special attention should be paid to the audit of government departments characterized by hazard or the evaluation of certain programs, regardless of the departments involved, which may be the subject to certain excesses (Isaksson et al. 2012)

Within the public sector, efficiency is an essential necessity, given that government agencies must use public funds to provide goods and services to the private sector. Thus, in order to guarantee the efficiency and effectiveness of the public sector expenditures, monitoring mechanisms such as internal and external audit are necessary (Pilcher et al. 2013)

3. The external public audit

In the specialized literature there are countless studies related to the connections established in the activity carried out by the internal and external auditors and how the result of their reports is affected, in terms of quality, professionalism, independence and efficiency.

Thus, opportunities are created for the cooperation between the external and internal audit, considering the increase of the present internal audit function, even the ISA (International Audit Standard) emphasizes the fact that the EA (external audit) can use the audit evidence of the IA (internal audit) being able to request assistance from them both, carrying out activities whose objectives are identical and thus the fruitful cooperation is justified.

The problem is, on one hand, the increase of efficiency by excluding the duplicated activities and implicitly the decrease of the cost related to the external audit activity, and on the other hand the quality of the external audit can be significantly affected by this collaboration. The decision from the point of view of cooperation is taken by the external audit so as not to affect the purpose of the activity carried out to provide adequate information to the interested institutions and to the general public (Argento et al. 2018).

At the level of the public sector, however, there is little research that shows the connections between internal and external audit. The external audit requires greater trust in the activity of internal audit. Thus, in terms of efficiency, the dependence of the external audit on the internal one consists in: removing the duplication, managing the multiple stakeholders, performing the audit without exceeding the established deadlines, declaring the established objectives. The researchers observed that from the point of view of the links between internal and external audit, a significant communication and consultation between them have a significant importance. The lack of communication between the two types of audit may indicate a lack of confidence which is not communicated, and thus these information barriers cannot be overcome (Pilcher et al. 2013). Compared to the audit in the private sector, the public sector audit is much more complex given the multitude of entities involved such as parliament, ministries, public sector agencies and also the public itself – entities which have distinct interests, but whose political and economic objectives coincide.

In any market economy, external audit holds a function of major importance, which may be applied differently, depending on the degree of development of the country, so that in developing economies governments establish stricter regulations for these activities in order to increase credibility and confidence in order to absorb more foreign investment (Phuong et al. 2017). From a social point of view, the audit has a significant role considering that it facilitates the understanding of information contained in the audit report based on which decisions with economic impact on the whole society were taken (Lungeanu, 2015).

As stated by Nikolovski et al. (2016), the external audit is performed in the interest of the general public, ensuring economic growth and efficiency, preventing any kind of abuse, financial fraud and corruption.

Pikhotskyi et al. (2019), highlight in its paper that in the public sector, the major concern is the financial control, considering that the support of the unquestionable standards within the budgetary sector has a significant contribution on welfare and social stability, as well as economic security. Thus, the trust of the population in the state and government depends on the efficiency of the financial control. Unlike control, which is a study of inconsistencies through which corrective measures are applied to improve adverse situations, the audit sets out an opinion and a proposal to solve the identified problem, both of which are key factors in supporting the management of an institution. Thus we can affirm that the external audit represents a technique for optimizing the use of public money, through which errors can be identified and optimal solutions can be found to solve them, providing correct information for managing public resources.

With the help of audit directives, the funds for achieving the goals in the public interest can be accessed much faster, through an optimal monitoring of the risks and a use of the financing sources in conditions of maximum efficiency.

Thus, the external public audit represents a process of control and monitoring of public money by carrying out much improved economic and financial activities, which leads to accelerated development and performance of public institutions.

For the existence of an efficient economy based on great objectives, the indispensability of the integrated public audit must be taken into account. Integrated public audit will ensure the identification at the right time of the inconsistencies that may appear related to the established performances and can propose solutions to remedy the non-compliant situations.

The main problem that Romania has faced lately is corruption – a problem that the external audit should permanently highlight in order to prevent the deterioration of the financial discipline, the public order and the waste of public resources, affecting both public institutions as well the population. Thus the main priorities should be aligning the audit standards with those existing at the international level, adapting the audit methodologies to the requirements of the market, as well as propagating the cross-border cooperation as stated by Lungeanu (2015).

External public audit activity in a modern economy is vital to ensure an adequate report on the use of public money. Thus, the external audit should perform independent analyzes related to certain government programs under conditions of maximum efficiency for the use of public resources, presenting their impact and the level of achievement of the set objectives, identifying and evaluating the areas and errors in which the results are below expectations, offering support to the institution or the government for the improvement of inadequate phenomena and formulating directives based on the results obtained by carrying out the audit activity, offering support to the interested parties for maximizing the results of the use of public funds (Ciochin et al. 2007).

After selecting the budgetary program and after approving the audit mission within The Governing Body of the Supreme Audit Institution (Romanian Court of Accounts Plenum), informs the unit that manages the program, the intention to initiate such an audit mission, followed by another stage that includes a series of activities called "preliminary activities" or "analysis of the state of program affairs" and which, on the one hand, implies the realization of the preliminary activities themselves and, on the other hand, the preparation of a report (summary) of the preliminary activities.

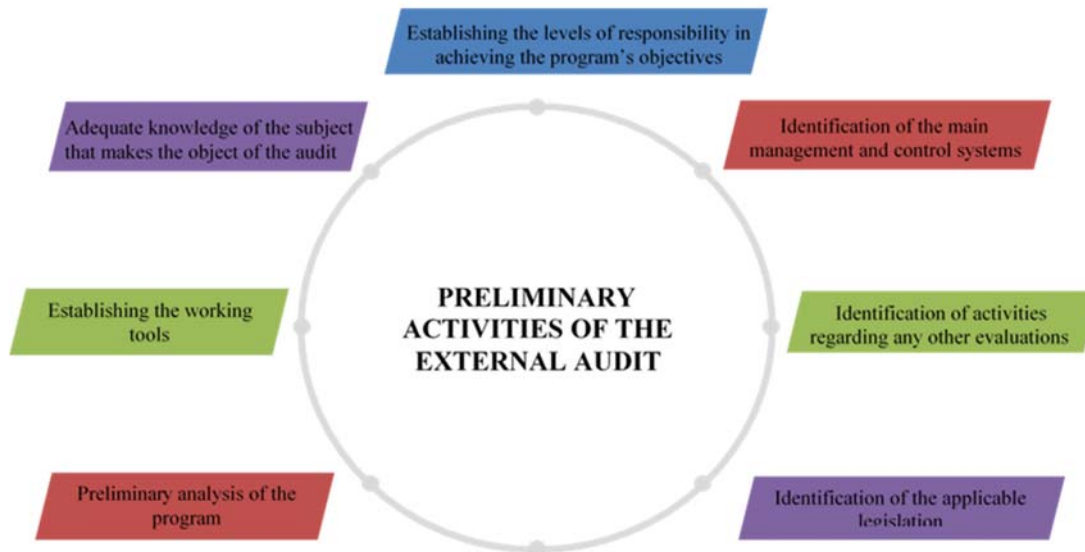
4. Research methodology regarding the preliminary activities of an external audit of budgetary programs

When referring regarding the preliminary phase, the auditors must develop several activities that are considered the initial step that should be taken when conducting an audit process. Within this paper we used as research methodology the specific analysis of the most important tools of a system or area of an audit, in order to be able to make the most appropriate decision in terms of the efficiency of the audit work.

These activities aim at establishing the working documents necessary for a good knowledge of the audited field. In the picture below are presented the preliminary activities develop carried out during the external audit.

In order to perform an external audit one of the most important activity is regarding the working tools, the documents that concern the budgetary program and the entity that makes the object of the audit. There may be used a large pile of documents, such as: Organizational Chart, the working rules and regulations used in the application of the program, the organization and functioning regulation of the entity, job descriptions for the staff employed, internal acts regarding the organization and functioning of internal control and internal public audit, the orders by which the powers of preventive financial control and other delegations of competences are assigned, program budget, the financial accounting documents (accounting and reporting), management reports, controlling reports, internal audit plan and audit reports, the control documents drawn up by the control bodies, any other document drawn up at the level of the audited structure that aims to run the program or correspondence (the communications) between the structures responsible for running the program.

Figure no. 4. The preliminary activities develop carried out during the external audit



Source: (authors' own contribution)

At the same time as requesting these documents, the auditors proceed to elaborate questionnaires regarding the risk assessment on audit areas and make visits to the audited entities, as the case may be, and can organize interviews. Based on the study of the documents, the questionnaires addressed and the organized interviews, there will be obtained information that will allow the formation of an image regarding: the functioning of the budget program from the perspective of pursuing the objectives and achieving the proposed results and the organization and functioning of the entity. For a clearer image, a diagram will be drawn up that will contain the organizational structures, as well as a relationship of decisional and financial nature between them.

The diagram can be divided into sub-diagrams by processes, activities and financial flows involved in the program (for example: human resources management and payroll, acquisitions, heritage management, own revenues). After the identification of the main management and control systems there will be highlight the structures and attributions in the management program and in the internal control process. There will also be identified the procedures and methods with which the internal control operates, as well as the data processing systems, with the explicit indication of how the controlling function is exercised.

One of the most important preliminary activity that should be develop involves the analysis of the external and internal audit reports (including the controlling ones), the financial statements drawn up during the audited periods. There also should be considered the normative acts, the ministerial orders and other regulations regarding the audited program. Carrying out the preliminary analysis of the program, involves performing a first evaluation regarding the objectives and the indicators of the program and if there are not, they must be identified them during the audit execution phase, based

on the information obtained from: interviews, questionnaires or documentation. Also there should be established a specific system needed for the audit report. After the completion of the activities presented above, the auditors prepare a report that will be the basis for the preparation of the audit plan.

5. Case study on the preliminary activities of the audit for the National Agency for Fiscal Administration

To establish compliance and performance within the National Agency for Fiscal Administration from Romania once every 5 years the once every 5 years goes through an evaluation at the territorial public internal audit structure. Through the specific activities of the audit, the aim is to evaluate the quality of the internal audit, to verify the compliance with the instructions, the norms of the Code of Ethical Conduct and also to issue recommendations in the event of correcting the dysfunctions detected to optimize activities.

The fiscal inspection of individuals and legal persons is carried out according to the legislation, regulations and instructions of the procedures regarding the planning, development and reporting of the activity in order to combat tax fraud and evasion, increase the efficiency and dynamics of collection, as well as optimize voluntary compliance. The people in charge are appointed in the procedures elaborated by the audited structure and by the National Agency for Fiscal Administration, being presented to them the stages, methods and rules that they must follow in order to carry out the activity.

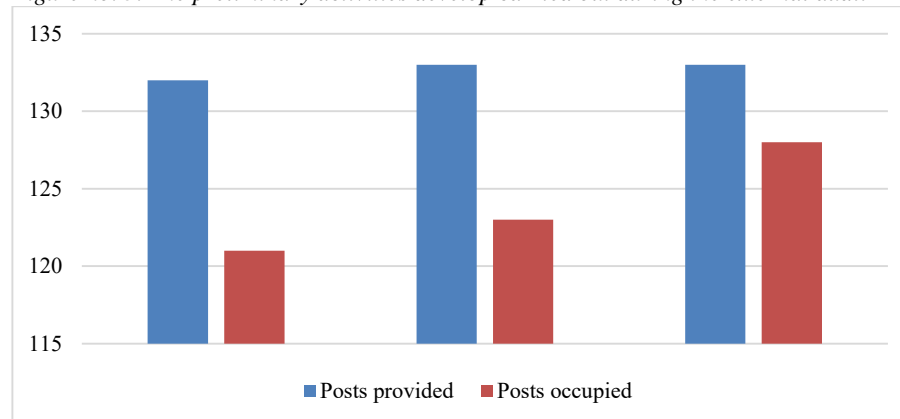
The objectives specific to the fiscal inspection activity are established annually and aim at increasing the efficiency of the activity, of the preventive function, of the effectiveness of the sanctions and also of the degree of responsibility in achieving the established goals.

Thus, the fiscal inspection activity is monitored with the help of performance indicators such as: decrease of fiscal loss on an inspection, share of contributions following the change of the tax base in total verified contributions, additional net value collected per inspector following fiscal inspection, number of inspections performed by an inspector or the level of debt collection following the application of precautionary measures through fiscal inspection.

At the level of the fiscal inspection activity, the audit team identified and monitored the following operational risks: breach of the procedure analysis of the payroll form, performing the electronic control inspection, performing the inspection, document analysis, archiving the action file, communication of fiscal administrative acts, non-compliance with the VAT settlement deadline, impossibility to institute precautionary measures, inadequate performance of coordination, planning, examination and management of inspection activity, alienation of shares/patrimony, entry into insolvency/dissolution until the beginning of the fiscal inspection.

As can be seen from in figure 5, for the audited period, the activity of fiscal inspection of individuals and legal persons was not influenced by significant changes in terms of staff within the structure, registering insignificant fluctuations of staff.

Figure no. 5. The preliminary activities develop carried out during the external audit



Source: (authors' own contribution)

6. Findings

We can highlight that within the fiscal inspection activity, a series of processes take place: conducting tax inspections in order to investigate the legality and concordance of tax returns, the correctness and accuracy of taxpayers' obligations, compliance with accounting and tax legislation, research/assessment of tax bases, establishing differences in payment obligations and related accessories; realization, approval and supervision of the activity program for the structures with fiscal inspection attributions; reporting the fiscal inspection activity by making notifications, reports and summaries regarding the fulfilment of the tasks according to the activity programs.

7. Conclusions

The audit areas mentioned above are generic in nature, being specific to a regular program on which during the preliminary activities no distinct risks have emerged from area to area. Normally, however, within any program there must be some activities that carry a much higher risk for errors than others, as well as the risk of the program registering greater dysfunctions in some areas than others, so there is a need for approach orders given the importance of each area in the audit. As we highlight within our case study, we can conclude that the preliminary activities of the audit for public institution (the national agency for fiscal administration in our case) are very important to establish compliance and performance.

When choosing the budget program that makes the object of the audit, we must take into consideration an analysis of the entire system or area of which it is part, in order to be able to make the most appropriate decision in terms of the efficiency of the audit work.

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