iMonitor

iMonitor
Enhancing law enforcement efficiency by bringing together public procurement data analytics and civil monitors
Project number: 101103267

FINAL CONFERENCE

27 March 2025
From 9.00 to 13.30
Hotel Indigo, Room Sundew
Place Charles Rogier 20 Brussels, 1210 Belgium

EVENT SUMMARY

Event objectives

On 27 March 2025, the Final Conference for the iMonitor project took place in Brussels, aiming to disseminate the project's results at the European level and reach a broader audience, including representatives of the European Parliament and the European Commission, as well as other actors engaged in anti-corruption research or activities in Europe. The aim was to enhance the visibility not only of the project as a stand-alone initiative, but also of its innovative approach as a model for involving civic monitors in the oversight of public investment. The event had 28 participants, including representatives of iMonitor partners, the speakers and external attendees from the anti-corruption policy and research fields.

Initial interventions and keynote address

The event started with welcoming words by **Jeroen Blomsma**, Head of Sector for Integrity & Anti-Corruption at **DG JUST**, and **Mihály Fazekas**, Scientific Director at the **Government Transparency Institute** (GTI). Mr. Blomsma underlined the importance of the iMonitor project in the context of the broader EU anti-corruption agenda, highlighting recent findings from a study published by the European Commission in November 2024[1] identifying public procurement as one of the six key sectors most vulnerable to corruption, a problem that costs the EU annually at least €180 billion according to the most conservative estimates. He also emphasised the growing momentum among EU institutions and international organisations to support the use of technology in identifying corruption risks, noting the increasing relevance of data-driven tools to guide public action in this domain. He also stressed the value of collaboration between public authorities and civil society, a principle that underpins both the iMonitor initiative and the EU Network against Corruption. Looking ahead, he announced that a new EU Anti-Corruption Strategy is expected in early 2026, potentially opening opportunities for further support to initiatives like iMonitor.

Mr. Fazekas expressed his appreciation for seeing those involved in the iMonitor project come together on this occasion, and set the stage for the discussion by highlighting the damaging impact of corruption on public services and how it contributes to citizens' sentiments of frustration with governments, fueling political polarisation and the erosion of trust in institutions, ultimately harming democracy. He stressed the anti-corruption potential of the iMonitor approach, rooted in civic activism and volunteer engagement, and the importance of empowering citizens motivated to keep an eye on investment in their communities. iMonitor provides a structured methodology and training to volunteers, helping people understand why procurement matters, how it affects their lives, and how they can engage with this topic to contribute to better public spending locally. Nevertheless, he stressed that the approach ultimately relies on collaboration with law enforcement to ensure that the results from the monitoring work are received by agencies who can act on them, showing monitors that there is real impact from their work and further motivating them for continued engagement.

These initial remarks were followed by a keynote address by **Nicolae Ștefănuță**, Vice-President of the **European Parliament**. He opened his keynote by expressing support for civic initiatives like iMonitor and appreciation for the Romanian project partner, the Romanian Academic Society (SAR). While not a specialist in public procurement, he emphasised that everything public is inherently political and relevant. Drawing on his experience and frequent exchanges with civil

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[1] Reference: "High-risk areas of corruption in the EU. A mapping and in-depth analysis", European Commission, November 2024.

society and journalists, he warned of a growing international backlash against democratic norms - what he described as a "MAGA-wave" - that seeks to dismantle the foundational pillars of democracy, including transparency in public spending. Following the United States' recent withdrawal from exercising soft power in supporting democratic development in the world, he argued that the EU must step in to fill some of this void, and highlighted a few proposals under discussion to increase funding for civil society and media. He acknowledged the growing ideological pressures faced by civil society and expressed concern that NGOs, once seen as neutral, are becoming political targets.

Mr. Ştefănuţă stressed that civil society must actively engage with political representatives and make the case for defending democratic values, especially at a time when increased defence spending risks crowding out support for transparency and civic oversight. "Democracy defence is also part of defence," he argued, making the case for sustained investment in investigative media and civil society. In the audience discussion that followed, participants debated whether democratic systems should be "defended" as they are or reshaped to reflect new forms of participation and technology. Concerns were raised about the growing gap between civil society and government structures, and Mr. Ştefănuţă agreed on the need to rethink current democratic structures while warning against the misuse of "exceptional" measures to curtail democratic liberties. Finally, he encouraged stronger advocacy toward institutions such as the European Public Prosecutor's Office, European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), and budget committees at the European Parliament as natural potential allies to strengthen the financial oversight dimension of anti-corruption.

Presentation of project results and lessons learned

The second part of the event included presentations by **Bianca Vaz Mondo**, project manager at **GTI**, and a panel with insights from iMonitor countries, brought by representatives of the national NGO partners involved in the project. Ms. Vaz Mondo first introduced the project's aims in its key areas of intervention - data, skills, network and anti-corruption action - and presented the iMonitor three-step monitoring approach - "Select, Monitor, Report" -, which combines a data-driven risk assessment with volunteer-based monitoring of contract implementation locally, producing actionable reports that, in case of identified irregularities, are forwarded to public agencies for further analysis.

She then presented the project's key achievements and lessons learned for each area of intervention. On data collection and analytics, the project improved the Opentender.eu platform by introducing more frequent data updates for iMonitor countries, and three new integrity risk

indicators. Relevant learnings in this dimension included the vulnerability to changes in external data sources, which had a substantial impact on the project in terms of the resources needed for data collection and processing, and the need to combine the integrity risk indicators with locally obtained information on other potential risks linked to the selected contracts. On the skill development dimension, the project trained 198 citizen monitors with a two-module programme covering basics of public procurement, relevant corruption risks and contract monitoring techniques. Learning gaps were identified and addressed with extensive mentoring offered by NGO partners to less experienced monitors, and further improvements are planned with the inclusion of more practice-oriented activities as part of future training rounds.

In terms of engagement and network-building, the project successfully fostered networks of motivated individuals and local civic organisations, facilitating their collaboration with public actors. A broad and flexible engagement strategy leveraging partners' existing relationships and experience with engagement methods was successfully adopted to tailor engagement strategies to each context; the value of experience sharing among monitors was also a relevant learning in this dimension. Finally, on monitoring and reporting, iMonitor created an integrated infrastructure for contract oversight, including a collaboratively developed reporting template, available on an online reporting tool integrated to Opentender.eu for seamless monitoring. In total, 101 contracts worth approximately €140 million were monitored. Important learnings included the successful effort to produce a comprehensive yet accessible reporting template with clear guidance for monitors, and the common challenge of accessing public information on the monitored contracts, a problem faced by monitors in all four countries.

Looking to the future, Ms. Vaz Mondo highlighted iMonitor's value-for-money proposition, with a highly scalable and adaptable approach centered on volunteer engagement, despite more cost-intensive elements such as the data infrastructure maintenance and the high staff effort required from NGO partners for mentoring activities. The mixed engagement strategy targeting diverse monitor profiles and the project's modular structure further strengthen its sustainability perspective and the potential for funding diversification in the future. A new project phase (iMonitor 2.0) funded by the ISF programme grant and involving a larger consortium of 11 organisations across seven countries will start in May 2025. This next cycle will prioritise construction and climate-related projects and incorporate feedback from current users to refine the monitoring tools.

The panel "Country insights from the iMonitor project countries", moderated by **Bruno González,** Head of the Data Analysis Team at the **Catalonian Anti-Fraud Office**, explored how the iMonitor approach was implemented across the four participating countries - Italy, Lithuania, Spain (Catalonia), and Romania. Mr. González opened by acknowledging the challenge of engaging

citizens in what is often seen as a technical and unappealing topic like public procurement. Nevertheless, he noted that iMonitor has succeeded in reaching its objectives by creating a practical and engaging model of civic oversight.

In Italy, **Luigi Reggi** from **Monithon Europe** described how the project built on their decade-long experience in civic monitoring. Starting from existing networks, Monithon reached out to dozens of local civic organisations, ultimately involving 13 civil society groups, 5 of which had no prior experience in civic monitoring. Monitors selected contracts with low integrity scores but high relevance for local communities. An important effort was made by Monithon to make monitoring more engaging and fun, and activities such as field visits and a "Selfie Challenge" helped keep engagement high. Of the 15 contracts monitored, 8 raised concerns and 2 may be forwarded to the Italian National Anti-corruption Authority (ANAC). He also emphasized the importance of community relevance and ongoing engagement, with several communities already committed to continuing their monitoring work.

In Lithuania, **Ieva Dunčikaitė** from **Transparency International** Lithuania explained how the country's low public engagement posed a challenge despite high corruption risks in large-scale procurement. To address this, the team partnered with Mykolas Romeris University and embedded the iMonitor training into the curriculum for law students. Over 60 students were trained and 21 contracts monitored, with contracts selected for their moderate value and risk profile. Challenges included limited information on bidders and suppliers and low FOIA response rates. However, monitors showed strong skill retention, and the partnership with public procurement authorities helped build civic engagement capacities. The university-based model was seen as a scalable entry point for future initiatives.

In Catalonia (Spain), **Pilar Rodriguez** from **Colpis** highlighted the project's emphasis on collaboration and innovation in public administration. Two training rounds were held in hybrid format, with a special module on procurement risks developed in cooperation with the Catalonian Anti-Fraud Office (OAC). Out of 60 registered participants, 44 completed the training and 31 monitored contracts. Six contracts showed irregularities and five were reported to OAC. Monitors came from diverse backgrounds, including students, public officials, and citizens, although women represented only 32% of participants. Challenges included motivating participants and obtaining information from public administrations. Success factors included strong collaboration with oversight agencies and high satisfaction with the training.

In Romania, **Andrei Macsut** from the **Romanian Academic Society** (SAR) discussed the project's grassroots focus. Initially 36 monitors were recruited, many very young; 15 remained active throughout the project. In-person training and tailored mentoring supported monitors in contract and asset declaration analysis. Contracts were selected based both on monitor interest and

Opentender.eu's integrity indicators. Positive experiences included a well-managed zoo redevelopment project in Braşov, while a notable negative case involved a traffic monitoring system under investigation for corruption, based on suspicions initially flagged by an iMonitor volunteer. In Romania, an additional monitoring exercise was conducted for mayoral asset declarations. Volunteers assisted with data collection on 1145 asset declarations, and an outlier analysis is underway to identify interesting cases for further exploration.

Closing panel: "The role of (big) data and civil society in safeguarding public investment"

After a short break, the event continued with a closing panel moderated by **Mihály Fazekas**. The discussion aimed to zoom out from the iMonitor project and explore the broader role of civic engagement and data-driven oversight in public procurement. Panelists reflected on the limits of existing institutional controls and explored how civil society can complement them, while also acknowledging some limitations of civic involvement.

Angelos Binis, Policy Coordinator for Rule of Law at the European Commission's **SG REFORM**, stressed the need to critically assess what works in engaging citizens in public procurement planning. Drawing from pilot initiatives in different countries, he noted that while tools to involve civil society exist, questions on their effectiveness and impact remain. He emphasized the effectiveness of open data, asset declarations, and the role of investigative journalism, but questioned the impact of participatory platforms that rarely result in concrete policy influence. He also cited social auditing examples from Latin America and citizen consultations in Australia as promising models when structured and linked to official processes.

Antonio Greco, from **Transparency International**, outlined the evolution of the Integrity Pacts (IPs) model - a formal agreement between contracting authorities and civil society to ensure oversight throughout the procurement cycle in selected procurement procedures. While iMonitor focuses on post-award monitoring, IPs are preventative, aiming to identify and correct irregularities early. Over €1 billion in contracts were covered in a recent EU pilot phase. Though positive results emerged, challenges persist due to the unstructured and voluntary nature of such interventions. Greco identified three success conditions: open-minded public authorities, expert civil society partners, and an inquisitive local community. He advocated for expanding the model to include private sector actors and integrate collective action mechanisms fostering more involvement from suppliers.

Benedetta Biancardi, Senior Expert at **ANAC**, highlighted the importance of an institutionalised dialogue between public authorities and civil society. She showcased ANAC's leadership in implementing Italy's Open Government Partnership (OGP) commitments, particularly in making

procurement data accessible and easily usable. She stressed that civic engagement must be built on clear policy frameworks, appropriate incentives, and proper training - both for civil society actors and public officials. This includes not only technical skills but also communication strategies to make procurement information understandable to non-experts.

The panelists agreed on the need for sustained and well-structured civic participation, underpinned by accessible data and strong incentives for all actors involved, including especially contracting authorities. They also discussed some relevant data constraints and the challenge of maintaining long-term citizen engagement for work in public procurement. In closing, the panel underscored that democratic oversight of public spending is more urgent than ever under the current geopolitical climate. Whether through legal frameworks, partnerships with open-minded authorities, or strategic use of open data, panelists agreed that empowering citizens and strengthening civil society's role in procurement oversight is essential but requires clear frameworks, support, and shared commitment.