

Procurement of the stationary supplies at the ministries during the years 2009-2011

On November 27, 2010 and on May 25, 2011, the Freedom of Information Center (FOIC) sent information requests to all ministries of the Republic of Armenia asking them about the 2010 and 2011 state budget allocations for expenses on stationary supplies (paper, pen, envelopes, folders, etc.) of the ministries and how much money was spent for purchasing stationary supplies in 2009 and 2010.

The analysis of the response letters from the ministries helped us to understand whether the Mulberry system for the circulation of electronic documents in the state bodies has helped to decrease the amount of money allocated for the stationary supplies for the ministries or had no impact on the expenditures on stationary supplies.

Before conducting a comparative analysis of the data sent from the ministries, let us analyze the conditions under which the responses of the 18 information requests from May 2011 were done, how the ministries this time implemented the Freedom of Information law of the Republic of Armenia and what was the time frame required to provide the information.

The FOIC has sent information requests to all 18 ministries, with none of the requests going unanswered. To note, for the FOIC information request from November 27, 2010, only the Ministries of Health and Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia did not respond. However, on May 16, 2011, more than five months after the FOIC information request was sent, the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia sent a written response providing the requested information, also mentioning that the responsible employee was subjected to disciplinary sanctions for the delay of the response. It should be noted that unlike other information requests, the FOIC's request to the Ministry of Health from May 25, 2011 was answered on May 30th, five days after the request was sent. In other words, if we calculate the time spent on postal delivery and note the weekend, then the FOIC's information request was responded to within 1-3 business days. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia, just like FOIC's previous information request, left the information request from May 25, 2011 unanswered. On June 24, 2011 the FOIC sent a similar information request to the Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia again. Six days later, on June 30, the FOIC received a full written response from the ministry. One out of 18 information requests was rejected, and in one case was referred to the website, which according to us was not a proper response. The remaining 16 information responses were responded to properly.

The content of the responded letters, written rejection, reference

All 18 respondent ministries have given proper responses. The Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia provided a written rejection for the requested information. The Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Armenia provided a reference to their website. The remaining 16 ministries provided the FOIC with requested information.

Before presenting the content of the ministries' responses, we will first present the cases of rejection and the reference. As a response to the FOIC's information request, the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia informed the Center that the ministry initiated the declassification process of state procurement. However, these works have not yet been completed, which is determined by a large volume of the procurement information for the needs of the armed forces as well as by the need for the detailed analysis of information from every category to avoid any leaking of state secrets. This assumes long-term and large-scale work. Therefore, the FOIC's requested information continues to remain classified as a state secret. Meanwhile, the document provided in response indicates that the work is expected to be completed soon, and after that, the procurement for the Ministry of Defense of the Republic of Armenia will be organized in more transparent conditions.

As was mentioned before, the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Armenia responded to the FOIC's information request with a reference. It is noteworthy, that the reference was not to the website of the Ministry of Environment of the Republic of Armenia, but to the websites of the Government (www.e-gov.am) and of the Ministry of Finance (www.minfin.am) of Armenia. It should be noted that in the "Interactive Budget" section of the website www.e-gov.am, to which the reference was made to, the FOIC could not find the information regarding 2009 budget allocations and expenditures for the stationary supplies of the Ministry of Environment. In any case, the requested information was available on the website of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Armenia. It should be noted, that in the end, the content of the reference of the Ministry of Environment was proper and the website of the ministry contained the requested information, however, the style of the response was not proper as the answer was not provided with the access to information principle. The ministry did not specify which part of the "State Budget" (electronic document) section of the www.minfin.am website contained the requested information. In order to find the necessary information, the FOIC spent quite a lot of time, because the necessary information was available on the website of the Ministry of Finance addendums of the Republic of Armenia law on "State Budget" from 2009-2011 which contains 25 different electronic documents. Thus, the response from the Ministry of Environment cannot be considered as proper.

Comparative analyses of the budget allocations from 2009, 2010, 2011 and expenditures from 2009 and 2010 for the stationary supplies for the Ministries of the Republic of Armenia

Since 2010, there has been a Mulberry system for the circulation of electronic documents in place at the Ministries of the Republic of Armenia. One of the aims of this system is to reduce the amount of money on stationary supplies necessary for the circulation of documents. Let's see how justified this program is, and whether the money allocated and spent on stationary supplies (paper, pens, envelopes, folders, etc.) were reduced after the Mulberry system was introduced (2010-2011).

For comparison, we will split the ministries in four groups, where we will present the comparison of budget allocations for the stationary supplies because the expenditures are limited to the allocated sums. The ministries that did not give a proper response or refused to give any respond to the FOIC's information requests are not included in the comparative analyses.

First Group- Compared to 2009, in 2010 and/or in 2011, there was more money allocated for stationary supplies for the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources of the Republic of Armenia.

Second Group- Compared to 2009, in 2010 and/or in 2011, the amount allocated for stationary supplies did not change (if the difference does not exceed 500,000 AMD) for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Third group- Compared to 2009, in 2010 and/or in 2011, the amount allocated for stationary supplies was reduced for the Ministry of Territorial Administration, Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Economy, Ministry of Education and Science, Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Sport and Youth Affairs, Ministry of Transport and Communications, and the Ministry of Urban Development.

Fourth Group- this group included the ministries that were not included in the previous three groups- Ministry of Agriculture (compared to 2009 in 2010 the allocated amount was increased and in 2011 it was decreased); Ministry of Diaspora (compared to 2009 in 2010 the allocated amount was decreased and in 2011 it was left the same); Ministry of Finance (compared to 2009 in 2010 the allocated amount was increased and in 2011 it was decreased).

Thus, in 9 out of 15 ministries analyzed, the amount allocated for the stationary supplies was reduced after introducing the Mulberry system, in the case of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs the allocated amount remained the same, and in another case, decreased for one year and stayed the same for the next year; in two cases, the amount decreased for one year and was increased for the next year; and in two cases after introducing the Mulberry system the amount allocated for the stationary supplies was increased. If we present these numbers in percentage, then after introducing the Mulberry system, expenditures on stationary supplies was reduced in 60 percent of the cases and for 40 percent of the cases, they either increased or stayed the same.

The responses of the ministries are presented in the table below. The table also contains the results of the previous information requests in order to make a comparison of content, and to determine how proper and the style of the responses possible (reference, rejection, written response, etc.).

It is noteworthy that the response from the Ministry of Finance was different from others. Unlike others, the Ministry of Finance presented allocated and expended sums not in total, but in detailed table form, which we are presenting below. It should be noted that to the FOIC's information request from 2010, the Ministry of Finance response contained a whole amount of the allocated sum for stationary supplies, which compared with the other ministries was the largest (allocated – 47,329,900 AMD, spent- 29,688,800 AMD). As a result, after FOIC published the response, in terms of media coverage, the large amount allocated to the Ministry of Finance was left unexplained, which could leave a confusing and negative impression on public. This time, the ministry not only presented the most complete answer, but also by clarifying the expenditures, it excluded any arbitrary or ambiguous comments.

Time frames

The seventh paragraph of Article Nine of the Law on Freedom of Information states that a written information request should be responded to within five days. The FOIC sent the information requests via post on May 25, 2011. Therefore, in order to understand the time frame, one should take into consideration the postal delivery time of 1-2 days and the factor of weekends. In any case, in order to avoid inaccuracies, while calculating the time frame, we took the information requests sending dates and the dates on the postal stamp from the response envelope.

At the end of the analysis, in table form, the responses of the ministries to the FOIC's information requests from May 25, 2011 are presented. In order to create an opportunity to evaluate the work of ministries in the freedom of information sphere and in terms of progress or regress of ministries in promptness, we included in the table as well as in the further analysis of time frames, the responses to the FOIC's information requests from November 27, 2010.

While analyzing the time frames, in the case of the Ministry of Emergency Situations of the Republic of Armenia, the time frame of the ministry's response to the FOIC's double information requests was calculated. But we should note that the ministry responded to the double information request which was sent on June 24, 2011, one month after the first information request was sent, which means that Ministry of Emergency Situations for one month was not responding to the FOIC's information request from May 25, 2011.

In terms of time frames, the best was the Ministry of Health of the Republic of Armenia, which responded to the FOIC's information request within five days. The Ministry of Agriculture, which responded to the FOIC's information request after 25 days, had the worst result. The Ministry of Foreign affairs also responded in five days time, however, they responded only after the FOIC sent the second information request, which means that before sending the second information request, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to the first one for one month. We can state that in response to the FOIC's information request from May 25, 2011, the Ministry of Emergency Situations replied more than one month later. In this respect, the Ministry of Emergency Situations is the worst and Ministry of Agriculture is the second worst in terms of time frame violations. The response from the Ministry of Defense to the FOIC's information request was proper, but was late. If the FOIC's similar request from November 27, 2010 was rejected in five days time, then the request from May 25, 2011 was rejected by the ministry after 23 days. As was mentioned earlier, the only author of a reference was the Ministry of Environment: the ministry sent the reference to the websites of the government (www.e-gov.am) and of the Ministry of Finances in a six day period.

Comparing the time frame between the two responses to the FOIC's information requests from November 27, 2010 and May 25, 2011, from the same ministry we see that the difference between time frames differs by a few days and does not exceed a ten-day period. However, there are some positive and negative exceptions: instead of responding within a nine-day period as before, the Ministry of Agriculture deteriorated the results of the time frame of the responses by answering the information requests within a 26-day period; before, the Ministry of Defense rejected the information request within five days, but this time, it deteriorated its result by 18 days by responding in 23 days period. Compared to the previous case, the Ministry of Defense improved its records of responses to FOI requests. Previously, responses to the FOIC's information requests were rejected within a 23-day period, but this time, in response to the FOIC's information request from May 25, 2011, it was rejected in 10 days. The progress of the Ministry of Emergency Situations is also positive. Instead of leaving the FOIC's Information requests unanswered, this time the Ministry of Emergency Situations responded to the double request within a five-day period.

Perhaps we can sum up the responses of the ministries with the most positive example. Although with a delay, the Ministry of Health provided the information requested by the FOIC on November 27, 2010. In addition, the Ministry of Health showed the best result by responding to the FOIC's information request from May 25, 2011 in five days. We should also note that 17 ministries (we did not take into account the Ministry of Emergency Situations which did not respond to the request) responded to the FOIC's information requests from November 27, 2010 on average of 18 days. In this case, we took into account the time frame of the Ministry of Health which exceeded five months. Without the index of the Ministry of Health, the average response to the FOIC's

information requests of 16 ministries would be eight days. To the FOIC's information requests from May 25, 2011, all the ministries responded on average within a 12-day period.