

GAO, leader of values of integrity and ethics in auditing

from Bujar Leskaj

The USA is not just the most democratic and powerful State in the world. The country's supreme public audit institution (called Government Accountability Office-the GAO) is a leading institution of INTOSAI, the world organization of Supreme Audit Institutions (SAIs). It is so not only for the values it carries out but also for the historical contribution it has provided.

26 years ago, in 1992, the GAO hosted the INTOSAI's INCOSAI XIV Congress in Washington DC, the event that marked the most important development in the SAI community from INCOSAI IX in Lima, Peru in 1977. The Washington Congress focused on the Standards and Guidelines for Supreme Public Audit. From there started the saga of the world's leading public audit product (which then drew the attention of the UN and today is the basis for monitoring its Development Agenda 2030), the internationally accepted supreme audit standards, called the ISSAIs. From Washington D.C. the INTOSAI's motto "Experientia mutua Omnibus prodest" (from common experience all benefit) took a clear and comprehensive form.

Over the years, the vitality gained from the professional standards process that started in Washington was combined with the definition of the strategic directions of INTOSAI. The GAO took over the leadership of INTOSAI's working group for the preparation of the Development Strategy 2011-2016 of the Organization. The INTOSAI's strategy helped us a great deal to pinpoint our development objectives in ALSAI's Strategy 2013-2017, notably INTOSAI's second objective of institutional capacities building and fourth objective of development towards a model organization.

The GAO was also in the forefront of the preparations for INTOSAI's New Strategic Development Plan 2017-2022, adopted at the last congress of the organization, INCOSAI XXII, held in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on 05- 11 December, 2016. The Chairman of the Working Group for INTOSAI's new Strategic Plan was the GAO's Comptroller General, Mr. Gene L. Dodaro, a friend of Albanians and of ALSAI.

Mr. Dodaro, in his lecture at the 2013 Annual Conference of the American Public Administration Association "Elliot Richardson," shares the contribution of the organization that runs in four pillars. First, he emphasizes that ethics and integrity form the basis for the audit. Secondly, he underlines the importance that GAO attaches to ethics and integrity in its work. Third, he highlights the role of the organization to reveal and publicly open the difficult truths in public governance. And fourthly, the assistance that his institution provides in promoting ethics and integrity in public auditing around the world. In this lecture, Mr. Dodaro states that *"As someone who has passed his career as a federal auditor, I can say without hesitation: solid audit work based on integrity and other ethical principles is necessary for effective government oversight and holding responsible people. GAO's work outlines government deficiencies, encourages proper behavior by public officials and private contractors, and helps to prevent controversial behavior. Sound audit work also contributes to better public policy outcomes and to improving government performance ... GAO's credibility depends on perception - and reality - that our work is carried out with integrity and ethical principles ... Without reliability, an audit does not have much value"*.

GAO is not simply the community of over 3200 employees with integrity, high professional standard and who are well-trained. The institution issues annually hundreds of audit reports and testimonies to provide Congress and independent Federal agencies executives with accurate information on government activities. Its High Risk Risks, Overlap and Duplication reports are an example for any of the world's audit institutions. The institution provides its input as a leader in auditing through the standards it implements, called the "Yellow Book" based on the rules of ethics and integrity, reflecting the best practices obtained from ISSAI standards.

The institution functions entirely as an agency independent from the Government. Although the GAO has no mandate to force the Government to implement the conclusions and recommendations of its audits, the institution imposes its values, persuading other activists to act. GAO's attending the sessions of the US Congress Committees is a particularly valuable and convincing element and the GAO staff leaves any other task to do so. But not just that. Almost all audit reports are public documents and are made available to the media. Media attention to an audit report may be a powerful incentive for corrective action in the Government, so GAO cooperates with media representatives. The GAO itself does not hold press conferences, but attends, if requested, press conferences held by another Federal institution (it could also be a Member of the Congress) which has requested the audit report. At these conferences, the GAO staff responds to questions from journalists.

GAO is a model for all supreme audit institutions in the world, for independence, professionalism, transparency and integrity, the values contained in INTOSAI's standards, the ISSAIs. In the previously mentioned lecture, regarding the ISSAIs, Mr. Dodaro states that *"These standards have real applications in the work of GAO and our auditors. GAO provides career reward for ethics and integrity. In fact, integrity is one of GAO's three core values. Others are accountability and credibility. These basic values are proudly sculpted on the front doors of the GAO building in Washington"*.

GAO works very closely with the US Congress. The connections are numerous and extensive, especially those with some standing committees of the Congress and the Senate. In other circumstances, such close ties between an SAI and the Parliament may be a threat to the independence of the SAI. But there are several reasons why GAO has been able to maintain its independence in this environment. I mention the two main ones. First, the institutional commitment to the independence and objectivity of the institution (strengthened by the personalities at the helm of the GAO since the organization's creation in 1921) is fundamental to the organizational culture of this SAI. Its staff instinctively and strongly resist any attempt to improper influence on the direction or content of the institution's work, even in cases where the alienation of work by Senators or Strong Members of the House of Representatives is threatened. Second, an even more important safeguard and guarantee for GAO's independence lies in the nature of the US Congress, in the numerous divisions of its power and the weak internal party discipline. These features are perhaps inherent in political history and American democracy, making it very unlikely for the Congress to exert such sustainable pressure on GAO to seriously threaten its independence. Moreover, there is a strong conviction in Congress - at least among

many of its most influential members- that the GAO's well-established public credibility is very valuable and an asset of Congress as an institution, and that the Congress is unable to allow this credibility to be reduced by short-term political dissatisfaction or political implications of any particular audit or series of audits.

The US Comptroller General in his 2013 lecture mentions *"We at GAO do not make politics, nor do we make political decisions. This belongs to Congress. But we believe that based on sound data, public officials are more likely to make informed decisions and do the right thing. This reliable and objective information is urgently needed today, due to the many fiscal, social and security challenges faced by our nation..."*

The GAO is also committed to fully informing the public about its work. We strongly believe in transparency, in the idea that US citizens should be as informed as possible about the performance and results of the Government. In my opinion, public understanding and support will be vital in addressing the difficult political issues that lie ahead. For this purpose, GAO publicly reports what it does. If you go online, you will find that almost every GAO report and testimony in Congress is on our website on the day it is made public".

The Center of Excellence in Auditing is a central GAO facility that works with all governmental and accountability institutions in the world to improve and increase their audit capabilities through training it provides. The Center assists the public supreme audit institutions (SAIs) to develop and implement sound audit quality assurance frameworks and strategic plans and strategies to develop their human resources, enhancing the knowledge of INTOSAI's international standards.

Based on these traditions and inalienable value of the contribution in holding accountable the most powerful and democratic State administration in the world, as well as in the development of the supreme public audit, we as ALSAI translated into Albanian and published in the year 2015 the GAO public supreme audit standards, "the Yellow Book" and later in 2018 the "Green Book" of standards for the internal control of Federal agencies. Reading and understanding these standards helps ALSAI auditors in their daily work and in advising the internal auditors.

In recent years, on the occasion of meeting Mr. Dodaro in his office on 3th of February 2015, our cooperation with the GAO has increased.

We are grateful to the GAO and especially to Comptroller General Mr. Dodaro, for enabling to five auditors from ALSAI the training for four consecutive months during the period 2016-2018, through the Fellowship Program at GAO offices in Washington D.C. This experience is of exceptional value to us.

On January 30, 2017, I met in Washington D.C. Mr. James-Christian Blockwood, Director of Strategic Planning and Ms. Janet St. Laurent, Director of the Center for Excellence in Auditing, following the issues discussed at the working meeting I had with the Comptroller General Mr. Dodaro in Abu D'habi in December 2016, on the occasion of the INTOSAI XXII Congress. We talked about the areas of cooperation with the GAO's Center of Excellence in Auditing.

In the coming days, on December 06, 2018, I will have the honor to meet again Comptroller General Dodaro in his office in Washington D.C. and we will talk for the excellent future of the long-term cooperation of ALSAI with the GAO, especially in the fields pertaining to development of ALSAI auditors capacities' in Performance Audit, IT audit, as well as in the field of ethics and integrity in auditing. Our challenge is to implement GAO standards by preparing "The Albanian Yellow Book", Albania's supreme public audit standards.

I want to close this writing with the message that Mr. Gene L. Dodaro, US Comptroller General conveyed to ALSAI on the occasion of the 90th Anniversary of ALSAI in May 2015 *"As a GAO leader, I have learned a lot from our many experiences at INTOSAI, including our commitment to developing INTOSAI's strategic plans... It is important for us to reflect on the diversity of INTOSAI as one of its strongest points and as a source of value for each SAI ... Supreme Audit Institutions today are positioned as never before, to made the difference, not just for their countries, but overall for the whole world. At national level, the SAIs assist to improve public services and help public executives plan for the future. At international level, working with their counterparts helps solve the encountered problems. I would like to express my best wishes for the ALSAI and for the continuation of your efforts in the service of good governance. I look forward to working with you to further develop the cooperation between our two institutions"*.