ZNasichDani.sk: Making procurement data matter more

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Since a couple of years back, one of our colleagues in the Fair-play Alliance - a former investigative journalist – has had a wish. Apart from our other watchdog / investigative duties, he has longed to create a tool which would enable its users to easily find connections between companies successful in big state tenders and concrete people influencing such companies. The result would be a useful tool for spotting possible corruption. Connections that you previously had to find manually using various resources, would be made by a computer for you in a blink of an eye.

We made a good start for this goal: Early in the history of the Fair-play Alliance, in 2003, we started collecting public data. Over the years, we created a website filled with information concerning spending of public finances from administrative institutions in Slovakia. We called it „The Database" and later „Datanest.sk". It is a unique resource – it contains all kinds of information from scraped public procurements data to various grants and subsidies and important decision makers in the public administration. Big part of the data isn't available online anywhere else, not even on official governmental websites.

But for all the data that we had, to make the desired connection between persons and companies successful in public procurements remained, for the time being, beyond our abilities.

We first succeeded in doing this late in 2010. By that time, the practice of scraping public data was beginning to resonate in the IT community in Slovakia and the first inventive guys tried experimenting with the Slovak Business Register data. Two of these guys proved to have exactly what we were looking – the ability to connect a person with a company without error or duplicities (there is no unique ID for persons in the Slovak Business register).

Their project – Visual Business Register of the Slovak Republic (VORSR.sk) – became one of the foundations of what was, a couple of months later, to be known as ZNasichDani.sk.

The other founding stone was the official governmental procurement data, which we were by that time scraping and storing in Datanest.sk. Combining these two types of information resulted in the ultimate shortcut for an investigative journalist. You could search for particular persons and instantly see, whether any companies which they were connected to either as owners, managers or as other officially reported top representatives were successful in getting the big state tenders.

The whole application was built in less than 6 weeks. It was first officially launched in spring 2011. The reaction – by users, businessmen and media, not to mention by the NGO sector abroad – was overwhelming at first. It seemed that ZNasichDani (the name would be translated as From our Taxes to English) came with a rare type of context for Slovak public procurements.

The praise and attention focused on ZNasichDani was positively motivational – not to mention a great satisfaction for our efforts. It will come in handy. Now, a year after launch, we are thinking: where should the application go from here?

For a start, we feel that it needs a few graphical improvements. The current design is simple – and that's good – but a few months' experience with the website made us understand, that the overall user experience has to be even smoother. So experimenting with design and the visualizations of public procurements it is for us. Gregor Aisch at OKFN agreed to provide a few tips, which is great! At the moment, we ourselves are quite curios about what we're going to come up with in a couple of months.

Another thing is the data. Adding new data to this mix of connections is a logical next step. We have a few ideas. And although we're not planning to go international with ZNasichDani at the moment, international opinions still could be useful for us. What do you think, what kind of connections would it be meaningful to show in your country / in the EU?

And then there's one unhappy but inevitable challenge: to finally resolve [the issue that we still have at court](). A year ago, ZNasichDani.sk was sued for 10,000 euro by a manager of one of the biggest construction companies in Slovakia. The reason for the action against ZNasichDani: the claimant felt that by releasing and mashing up the (already publicly available) data about her we were putting her in bad light. After a preliminary ruling, requiring us to temporarily withdraw part of the data about the claimant from the website, was cancelled in autumn 2011, the lawsuit is still only in the beginning. We haven't heard anything from the court since autumn last year.

But hopefully, in 2013, [ZNasichDani]() will not only look and work a bit better, but also get a new sense of freedom, after a victory at court.