

BLACK BOOK

OF PUBLIC MONEY WASTE

IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

2025

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**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
FOUNDATION** For Freedom.
Romania and Moldova



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FOREWORD

For seven years, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and the Association of Independent Press have supported and motivated investigative journalists in the Republic of Moldova to diligently follow the path of public money. Procurement procedures, the execution of works, and the provision of services for public institutions, as well as the management of investments made with European or local funds, are all areas vulnerable to corruption. This is precisely why democratic oversight from civil society and the media is necessary at every stage. Investigative journalists, especially those working on the **Black Book** project, excel at this task. Every year, they monitor transactions, ribbon-cutting ceremonies, procurement competitions, and appointments, verifying and documenting them. At the end of the year, they raise the alarm if they believe that transparency and fairness have been compromised.

This year's edition of the Black Book of Public Money Waste in the Republic of Moldova presents new examples of disregard for the common good and public funds, some of which are criminal in nature. However, until prosecutors begin investigating, journalists contribute to cultivating an attitude of intolerance toward corruption and related phenomena in society. They also increase public pressure on institutions responsible for ensuring integrity and good governance in the public sector.

In recent years, the number of journalist investigations into partially compromised or inefficiently executed cross-border or EU-funded projects has increased. These projects have been affected by factors such as vested interests and incompetence. For this edition, journalists documented at least three cases, showing that careful monitoring of development projects and constant community information are still necessary in the event of any deviations.

In addition to the project's anti-corruption focus, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom's support of the **Black Book's** publication aims to encourage high-quality investigative journalism, particularly among young journalists. For the past 10 years, the Foundation has developed various projects in the Republic of Moldova to support independent journalism. These projects have strengthened media institutions, training professional journalists who can address topics in depth and respond to society's need for information and debate.

SERGIU BOGHEAN,

Project Coordinator at the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom,
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“THE EUROPEAN VILLAGE” ALLEGATIONS OF CORRUPTION AND AN ELECTORAL FEUD

VICTOR MOȘNEAG,
ZIARUL DE GARDĂ, 10 February 2025

The implementation of a 10-million-lei project in Bilicenii Vechi, Sîngerei District, as part of the „European Village” program financed by the Romanian and Moldovan governments, has led to allegations of corruption. A letter was sent to all law enforcement agencies and top officials in the country accusing the former leadership of the mayor’s office of paying almost 700,000 lei for materials and work that only existed on paper. The former mayor’s office leadership, which implemented the project, claims the allegations are unfounded. The technical manager attributes the allegations to an ‘electoral’ feud between the current mayor and the former commune leader.



EVERYTHING LOOKS GOOD IN THE PRESS RELEASES

The project “Sanitation for Bilicenii Vechi”, a commune in Sîngerei district, is valued at **10.12 million lei**. Initiated on 30 June 2023, it was expected to be completed within a year. The project was funded through the “European Village” program. The Romanian government contributed **1.82 million lei**, while the Moldovan government covered the rest. These works represented the first stage of a larger, **40-million-lei project** to provide the entire locality with access to the sewerage system.

In June 2024, the authorities announced that the project financed by the Chișinău and Bucharest governments “has brought major changes to the community’s life.” “Now, approximately 100 households, including the local kindergarten, have access to the centralized sewerage network. As part of the national program “European Village, Edition I,” a 4.2-kilometer sewerage network was built in the commune of Bilicenii Vechi, connecting the village to the town of Sîngerei’s sewerage system. The project included constructing approximately 4 km of sewer networks within the locality and a wastewater pumping station. Now, in addition to the 100 households with approximately 500 residents, the kindergarten and three local businesses also have access to the centralized sewerage

system,” read the press release issued by the National Office for Regional and Local Development.

LETTER WITH ALLEGATIONS ADDRESSED TO THE PRIME MINISTER AND LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES

However, things do not look as they were announced in the press releases. **Natașa Bezerău**, the mayor of Bilicenii Vechi, states that only a few households were connected to the sewerage network on a trial basis in January 2025, since there were suspicions that the work had been carried out with a number of irregularities, so the system may fail when it is put into operation.

In December 2024, Natașa Bezerău sent a letter accusing those who implemented the project of corruption to Prime Minister **Dorin Recean**, the National Anti-Corruption Center, the Anti-Corruption Prosecutor's Office, and the Prosecutor's Office for Combating Organized Crime and Special Cases.

The letter states that the Mayor's Office reviewed the cost estimate for materials and work and “found that the materials specified in the execution documentation to maintain the durability of the sewerage network were missing. Specifically, the layer of sand and gravel under the 6.9 km sewer pipe is missing.” The document also states that “there are already cracks in the sewerage route in the locality after the autumn rains.”

After reviewing the execution documentation, the Bilicenii Vechi Mayor's Office announced the following:

“For the sand layer, the amount of **207,297.201 lei** was paid. For the gravel layer, the amount of **170,466.388 lei** was paid. For these works (according to the cost estimate), the amount of **300,263.752 lei** was paid.”

“In total, for these materials and services within the nominated project, the Mayor's Office, with the support of the Romanian government (European Village I), paid the contractor Valdcongrup SRL the amount of **678,027.341 lei**.”

Through the voice of Mayor Natașa Bezerău, the institution requests “assistance in investigating the malicious violations committed by the contractor Valdcongrup SRL, its technical manager **Ghenadie Guzun**, and the commune's former mayor **Ala Guzun** in the management of public funds. These violations include failing to execute the project estimate

documentation and embezzling European funds allocated to the project through the "European Village I" program. The mayor claims that she was 'intimidated and directly threatened' after publicly stating her intention to assess the project, 'in order to force me to abandon such actions'.

"EXCAVATIONS PROVED THAT THERE IS NOTHING THERE."

"In April and May (of 2024 – editor's note), there were discussions with citizens right here in the neighborhood. Two men asked me, 'What kind of project are you proposing? There's money laundering going on there. There's no gravel or sand'. In October, I insisted that we all meet, including the designer, the technical manager, and the people who did the work. I insisted that we come and do some digging. I knew there was nothing there. There was no sand or gravel there. I told them to choose any place in the area and dig, regardless of whether there was a road. We did the digging, and obviously, excavations proved that there is nothing there. The estimate clearly stipulates sand and gravel bedding. The places where drainage is needed have gravel bedding. The entire section is supposed to have sand bedding, but it's nowhere to be found," Natașa Bezerău says.

Two mayor's office employees who witnessed the inspections confirm her statements. "They dug for the sewer and found it. They dug with a tractor, then with a shovel, and there was nothing of what they claimed – sand and gravel – there. There is nothing but empty ground there. I don't know what the documents said, but I'm telling you what we found. There is absolutely nothing there; it's just empty ground. Just ground and pipes," says **Emilian Fotescu**, an employee of Bilicenii Vechi Mayor's Office. "The company representative, the Technical Supervision Agency representative, the mayor, and the technical supervisor were present when excavations were carried out in a specific, random location. It was found that there was no sand cushion....," states **Ion Ciobanu**, a cadastral engineer at Bilicenii Vechi Mayor's Office.

"I WAS INFORMED THAT FINES OF 30,000 LEI WERE IMPOSED."

Natașa Bezerău was elected mayor of Bilicenii Vechi village in the November 2023 local elections. Running as a candidate for the Party of

Change (*Partidul Schimbării*), Bezerău defeated PAS representative Ala Guzun, a former Socialist Party of Moldova (PSRM) member who had held the position from 2015 to 2023, in the second round. The project was implemented, with part of the work carried out during the latter's term.

"I'm not sure if this system can work anymore because the ground on this road has significantly subsided. There have been various incidents. For example, a horse and cart once fell into it. I'm certain that this pipe is no longer in its original condition," the mayor says. She says this is precisely why she only allowed 'four or five homes to connect to the sewer system, to see how this station behaves. But we cannot use it because of the situation that has arisen'.

In 2024, the mayor asked the relevant authorities to inspect the quality of the work. In response, **Ion Moraru**, head of the National Inspectorate for Technical Supervision (INST), informed her in October 2024 that the work "was carried out with deviations from the execution documentation. Specifically, the sand bed under the sewer pipe was not installed, despite the project's specifications." However, since the project was not phased and the building permit was issued for the entire scope of work, (i.e., construction of the entire sewerage network – editor's note), the institution announced that it could not draw any conclusions until the work was completed.

"I was verbally informed that fines of 30,000 lei had been imposed on the contractor and the technical manager. However, I was not given a copy of the report, despite my request," said Natașa Bezerău. Ion Moraru, the head of INST, confirmed to *ZdG* that the fines had been imposed 'for deviations from the project'.

Natașa Bezerău claims that she began receiving threats after she started checking the quality of the work. "The first one was on the morning of October 3, when I arrived at work. I had already heard from the accountant and the mayor's office specialist that they had found the stove turned on with an empty pot on it. It was a very stupid situation. We weren't using the kitchen or the gas at that time. Afterwards, I received various calls, both from the technical manager and from those who carried out the work. They wanted to meet and talk. No money was offered directly, but there were proposals for agreements — let's come to an understanding. There were also proposals to meet in Chișinău, which I refused. I don't know what would have happened next, but I didn't go," the mayor alleges.

TECHNICAL MANAGER: "GRAVEL LAYER CANNOT BE PLACED UNDER THE PIPE"

However, those who participated in the implementation of the project categorically deny the mayor's allegations. Ghenadie Guzun, the project's technical manager, states that the work was carried out in accordance with all construction standards. "Gravel cannot be placed under pipes. Sand or soft soil is placed under pipes. Gravel is only placed on top of the surface. I explained this to the mayor. She wants gravel. Gravel is laid on top," explains the technical manager, who provides more details. "Gravel was placed on the road from the cemetery to that road to Chișcăreni. A white road was built. According to all the project documents, all the gravel in the cost estimate was used for the roads. When the trenches were filled in, the gravel was placed on top of the pipe, not underneath it. We clarified that this is how it should be done. Gravel is not placed under the pipes because it can break them. Instead, it is placed on top of the ground where the trench has been filled in. This restores the roads to their original condition before construction of the sewerage system began," Ghenadie Guzun says.

He ties the allegations to the conflict that supposedly occurred between the current and former mayors. "None of this is true. Everything was put in place. Everything was done according to the design and to the building regulations. Everything was done properly. They simply want to show... this electoral battle is ongoing. She is slandering the former mayor, and we have also been caught up in this mudslinging," alleges Ghenadie Guzun in his turn. Originally from Bilicenii Vechi, he moved to Bălți during the Soviet era. Although Guzun has the same surname as the mayor who initiated the project and their families are distantly related, he claims that he never favored the institution and participated in the project to benefit his native village.

FORMER MAYOR: "I CAN SAY WITH CERTAINTY THAT THE WORK WAS DONE IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PROJECT."

Ala Guzun, the mayor of Bilicenii Vechi from 2015 to 2023, claims that the allegations made by the current administration are fabricated and do not correspond to reality. "The work was carried out in accordance

with the project and in compliance with all the listed requirements. Every day in the field, the company staff worked alongside the technical manager and was overseen by the financier. With great respect for all citizens, I can say that during Ala Guzun's term, work was done specifically to benefit the people and bring services closer to them. I can say with certainty that the work was done in accordance with the project," says the former mayor, who now works for the Singerei District Council.

"Gravel was placed on top. Of course, not all surfaces were covered with gravel. It was only placed on the necessary surfaces after the layer of soil was laid. This gravel was certainly brought in and laid. Although excavations were carried out on a single section, the reality is that the section where this work was carried out is 10 km long. Perhaps when they dug in, in that pit, they came across the chernozem part, where it wasn't necessary to put sand. Everything was done according to the project, and it is a success story for our locality," says the former mayor.

GENERAL CONTRACTOR: "YOU DON'T PUT GRAVEL IN THE SEWER, I DON'T KNOW WHERE SHE GOT THAT FROM."

Valdcongrup SRL is the company that carried out the work. Founded in 2009, it is a limited liability company based in Chişinău. Its declared activities include building construction and installing water, sewerage, and heating networks. The company regularly participates in tenders announced by state institutions. According to data from the Public Procurement Agency portal, it obtained contracts worth over 350 million lei with various state institutions, especially for the construction of engineering networks, between 2013 and 2025. Public records indicate that **Lucia** and **Denis Țurcan** own the company.

Anatolie Țurcan, the company's site manager, told *Ziarul de Gardă* that the work was carried out in accordance with Moldovan construction regulations. He believes the issue is most likely related to a settling of accounts between the current and former mayors. "The object was accepted by Natalia, the mayor, not by anyone else. I don't know what she wanted that the other one put some obstacles in her way with the financing. I don't know what they have between them, but the object was accepted, and all the approvals are in place. Everything is working. She told me to thank Ms. Guzun that she (Natalia – editor's note) was

going to report it to the anti-corruption authority," the company representative says.

Anatolie Țurcan says he is ready for inspections by all responsible institutions because he is confident the work was done to a high standard. He admits that his company was fined 30,000 lei because no sand was found at the excavation site, but he claims this was an isolated incident. He paid only half of the amount as he paid the fine within 72 hours.

"Gravel is used for roads, not sewer pipes. Just because she didn't find any sand when she dug there doesn't mean there isn't any. Sand is only used in sewers when necessary. If the ground is soft, then sand isn't used. There are rules in place," concluded the Valdcongrup SRL site manager. He later sent us an excerpt from the relevant legislation, which states that "the foundation bed under pipes is determined based on the bearing capacity of the soil and the external loads acting on the pipes."

At the end of January 2025, one month after requesting that law-enforcement agencies and the country's leadership verify the project, Mayor Natașa Bezerău stated that she had not received a response. She said that her complaints had been forwarded to the National Anti-Corruption Center, but she had not been informed of the measures taken. Bezerău maintains that she will not accept commissioning of the sewerage system until she receives guarantees from all institutions and companies involved that the system can operate at full capacity.

On Wednesday, 29 January 2025, the National Anti-Corruption Center (CAN) informed Mayor Natașa Bezerău that it was investigating the circumstances surrounding the implementation of the project in the village of Bilicenii Vechi, and that it had extended the deadline for responding to the request submitted at the end of December 'given the high degree of complexity of the case'.

In 2024, the Bilicenii Vechi Mayor's Office applied for funding through the "European Village, 2nd Edition" program for the 'modernization and expansion of the sewer infrastructure'. However, the project was not approved for funding. It ranked 282nd out of 314 projects submitted, and only 223 projects were available for funding. The mayor's office challenged the decision, but it was not changed.

EMPTY “TRUST”.

WHY SOCIAL CENTER, OPENED IN CORTEN, TARACLIA, WAS UNUSED FOR 1.5 YEARS, DESPITE INVESTMENT OF 2.2 MILLION LEI

PIOTR GARCIOU,

MOLDOVACURATA.MD, 18 February 2025

In March 2023, the “Încredere” Residential Center for at-risk children opened in the village of Corten, in Taraclia District, in the building of the former boarding school. Several rooms in the former school were repaired and furnished with funds donated by the European Union, the Soros Foundation Moldova, and the Taraclia District Council. However, the Center did not operate for even half a year. In February 2025, the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, having taken over the Center from the district administration, announced that it had reopened it but changed its profile, converting it from a residential center to a day center for children and the elderly.



IN JANUARY 2025 THE CENTER WAS STILL CLOSED

The building where the “Încredere” (*Trust*) Center is located is easy to find. A paved path leads to the main building, and the remains of a Soviet-era playground can be seen on one side. A sign posted at the entrance informs us that this is a residential center. No one can enter because the door is locked. However, we can see some of the rooms through the windows. Mattresses and blankets are made up on the beds. However, the empty building’s atmosphere is especially conveyed by a toy tiger that we see in one of the rooms through the window. The rooms, including the kitchen and laundry room, still have their appliances and furniture. This is what the center looked like at the end of January 2025.

BOARDING SCHOOL RECYCLED INTO RESIDENTIAL CENTER

Until 2018, this building housed a boarding school that was closed by the government in connection with the implementation of the inclusive education program. This involved creating alternative placement options for children without parents or at risk. Thus, the children who

were here were placed in one of two ways: either with their families, who received financial support to care for them, or with other families who provided professional foster care services.

In 2021, “PRIMA” Civic Association collaborated with Taraclia District Council to obtain funding from the European Union and the Soros Foundation Moldova, to create the social service “Residential Center for Children at Risk.” On 21 December 2021, the District Council approved the creation of the service, its operating regulations, and its staffing levels. Ten specialists were to work there, either full-time or part-time. In October 2022, the Council made a subsequent decision to increase the staffing level by 1.5 units. A year later, in September 2023, the Council provided the Center with a transport unit: a RAV 2203 bus manufactured in 1993.

FAST OPENING AND SILENT CLOSING

The grand opening of the Center took place in March 2023. The European Union and the Soros Foundation Moldova jointly allocated about 1.2 million lei for repairs and renovations, while the Taraclia District Council contributed an additional 1.1 million lei. The institution was intended for children who had been temporarily separated from their parents for various reasons. They were supposed to live there under the supervision of teachers, nurses, and psychologists until a new family was found for them. In July 2023, the Taraclia District Council website announced the placement of the first two beneficiaries at the Center. However, the Center ceased operations shortly thereafter.

Georgeta Scopenco, the president of AO “PRIMA”, the organization that managed the EU- and Soros Foundation Moldova-funded project, refused to discuss the closure of the center with us. “I have no comment. Please direct all inquiries to the District Council. Goodbye.”

Galina Filipova, the former head of the Taraclia District Social Assistance Department, confirmed that the Center operated for only four to five months before closing. “It ceased operations due to a lack of funding that was supposed to be provided by the District Council. There were significant expenses, and by the end of the year, the budget had no remaining funds for this,” Filipova explained.

WHY DID THE INSTITUTION NOT FUNCTION IN 2024?

On 1 January 2024, the Republic of Moldova began implementing a national reform of its social assistance system, known as ReStart. Territorial social assistance agencies (TSAA) were established. The Center came under the management of TSAA South, which is part of the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection and is responsible for financing it. Upon our request, Ministry officials informed us that the Center's activities had been temporarily suspended due to several factors. These include "the lack of requests for placement or residential care of children, as well as policies promoted at the national and international levels that advocate for the deinstitutionalization of children through the provision of family-type services, such as professional parenting services and family-type children's homes." Ministry officials stated that the funds earmarked for the Center in 2024 were redistributed to other social services 'based on local priorities and the needs of the child protection system'.

According to Galina Filipova, the director, she continued to receive half of her initial salary throughout 2024, even though the Center was not operational. Several security guards were also paid during this period from the District Council's budget because the territory on which the Center is located belongs to the district administration.

FROM CHILDREN'S CENTER TO ADULT CENTER

In May 2024, Secretary of State for Labour and Social Protection **Vasile Cușca** visited the center. The subsequent press release indicated that solutions were being sought to reorganize and reactivate the Center's operations. The response we received from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection in February 2025 states, "In 2024, a local needs assessment was conducted that revealed the necessity of developing an additional service in Corten. This service would cater to various vulnerable groups, including children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities. The goal was to better address the community's needs and optimize resource allocation. Accordingly, it was decided that it should be reorganized into a social services center that can provide services tailored to different categories of vulnerable beneficiaries."

A few months after this visit, in December of 2024, the District Council announced plans to open a care home for the elderly here.

In February 2025, the institution's reopening as a day center for the elderly and children was finally announced. According to **Serghei Filipov**, Vice President of the Taraclia district, the first beneficiaries will be ten people over the age of 60 and ten children from vulnerable families.

Meanwhile, during the 1.5 years that the building was closed, it passed from one management to another. In spring 2023, after the Center's launch, the District Council transferred ownership of the building to the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. However, in December 2024, the councilors canceled their decision to transfer the institution because it was not functioning, meaning they took the building back. Then, in January 2025, the Ministry sent a letter to the District Council announcing that funds had been allocated to finance the Center and requesting that the building be put back into use.

THE CENTER IS FINALLY REACTIVATED, AFTER 1.5-YEAR BREAK

The reorganized Center has been operating since 3 February 2025. According to **Lazar Dermenji**, the president of the Taraclia district, the Center employs a director and three specialists: a social worker who assists the elderly and two educators who work with children. Children from vulnerable families come to the Center after school to have lunch, do their homework, and participate in developmental activities.

The "Încredere" Center receives funding from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection, as well as from the District Council. For instance, Lazar Dermenji said that the Council found an entrepreneur to provide food for the Center's beneficiaries.

According to the District President, the institution will be developed into a residential and day care center that will also provide paid services.

"THE BOTOȘANI" PROJECT IN BĂLȚI:

POND WITHOUT WATER, BROKEN BENCHES, AND RUSTY STAIRCASE, AFTER €1.62 MILLION INVESTMENT FROM THE BUDGET AND EUROPEAN FUNDS

**CONSTANTIN HAIRETDINOV,
ESP.MD, 24 February 2025**

In January 2024, the redevelopment of Mihai Volontir Central Park in Bălți was completed. The project was carried out in partnership with the city administration of Botoșani, Romania. The €1.62 million project was called "Eminescu: Same Culture, Same Route in Botoșani-Bălți Cross-Border Area." However, not everyone was happy with the results. Below, we explain the cost and current appearance of certain elements, including the „Water Lily Pond,” the stairs leading to the park, and the benches. We have also compared these elements with those in a park in Ungheni, which served as a model for developing the Bălți park.



ACTIVIST: "IT'S A WASTE OF MONEY"

Last summer, civic activist **Nicolai Usatîi** and several of his supporters organized a 'people's gathering' in Bălți to discuss the quality of work done as part of the project. In his opinion, the repairs carried out in Central Park were a failure and a waste of money. "I was bothered by the cost of certain features, such as the expensive benches, trash cans, and the so-called 'Water Lily Pond,' which has neither water nor water lilies. When the pit was filled with water, it was clear that it was dangerous. The edges were not high enough to prevent children from falling in. Even now that the water has been removed, the pit is still dangerous; you can fall in. As for the Corten steel used on the steps leading to the park, it looks unfinished and is a failure in my opinion. It's unpleasant and catches the eye. It's a waste of money."

"I haven't seen the authorities consult with the townspeople. Did anyone on the municipal council ask what the renovated park would look like? Who made the decision? Who confirmed the decision? It's strange that the local authorities aren't saying anything about this. They're not talking about it at all. Does everyone really like the result? This issue was not taken seriously, and as a result, the park is a failure," Nicolai Usatîi added.

DESPITE COSTING OVER 500,000 LEI, THE POND WITH WATER LILIES DOES NOT EXIST

According to the Bălți City Hall website, the Central Park development project cost **€1,620,625.26**. Of this amount, **€746,567.04** came from the municipal budget, and the remainder came from a European grant obtained under the Romania–Republic of Moldova 2014–2020 program. The project included the following works: paving access roads, rebuilding stairs leading to the park, installing Corten steel structures that are resistant to precipitation and weather changes, creating a ‘water lily pond’, and installing benches.

We decided to inspect three areas: the ‘Water Lily Pond’, the stairs leading to the park, and the benches with trash cans. After the work was completed on 5 January 2024, water was only poured into the ‘Water Lily Pond’ once, at the end of May 2024, for Bălți City Day. However, shortly afterwards, the water was drained, and the ‘pond’ has been dry ever since. This is despite the fact that 500,000 lei were spent on its construction.

We requested information from City Hall regarding the cost of specific projects, including those related to the Water Lily Pond. Although we did not receive a clear answer, we were provided with documents, including tax invoices. Thus, we calculated the cost of the projects by category.

- Construction of the ‘pond’ basin – 367,593.59 lei;
- Aqueduct – 40,401.30 lei;
- Sewerage system – 89,802.89 lei.

Although it is difficult to say exactly what was used for the pond, electrical cables were also installed. Of the 367,593.48 lei allocated for the basin construction, over 100,000 lei was spent on equipment for the pond. This includes pumps, water filters, and artificial water lilies, which cost 23,805 lei.

Judging by the figures in the documents, a total of 54 artificial water lilies were purchased.

- 30 yellow water lilies (10 cm) – 6,650 lei;
- 18 white water lilies (18 cm) – 9,525 lei;
- 6 water lilies (28 cm) – 4,330 lei.

The Bălți City Hall website shows what the water lilies were

supposed to look like. Water lilies produced by the same company, Hessner, are sold in one of the online stores at the following prices:

- with a diameter of 10 cm – €3.49 each (approx. 70 lei)
- with a diameter of 18 cm – €4.95 (approx. 100 lei)
- with a diameter of 28 cm – €6.99 (approx. 140 lei).

These prices do not include delivery costs, which vary by platform. A total of €1,000 was spent on water lilies. The reason for their purchase is unclear, as city residents have only seen the water lilies once—on City Day in 2024.

STAIRS LEADING TO THE PARK COST NEARLY FOUR MILLION LEI

City Hall invoices show that repairing the stairs leading to the park cost **3,851,356.06 lei**. This includes the cost of the Corten steel used to cover the railing of the steps. Shortly after installation, however, the metal rusted, affecting the concrete slabs and giving them an old, abandoned appearance. According to the response we received from City Hall, the object looked the same when it was put into operation, and no one had any objections.

BENCHES AND TRASH CANS

A total of 74 benches and 82 trash cans were purchased. Each bench cost 8,600 lei, plus 600 lei for installation. Each trash can cost 7,400 lei, plus 500 lei for installation. A total of **1,328,600 lei** was spent on the benches and trash cans, including installation. The benches were purchased from the Romanian company Kronemag Millenium SRL. The prices on the company's website are consistent with those in the City Hall documents. We found several models of benches similar to those purchased by the Bălți City Hall on online sales platforms in Moldova, but at lower prices ranging from 4,500 to 5,400 lei per bench.

The criteria used to select these benches is unclear. It is reasonable to assume that few companies in Moldova can deliver the required quantity and quality of benches. However, 16 of the 74 benches installed as part of the project are already destroyed. They are missing boards, so they are either unusable or uncomfortable.

THE WORK IS COMPLETE

We asked city officials whether the park was open. We received answers to only some of our questions without the necessary clarifications and a set of documents. One of the responses was signed by the city's chief architect **Ivan Makovski**.

It shows that:

- The works were executed in full;
- The final acceptance certificate for the work has not been signed because the five-year warranty is still in effect;
- The progress of the works was supervised by accredited specialists;
- No objections were raised;
- Decisions regarding the selection of materials used are made by the project's lead architect.

WHAT THE COMPANY THAT PERFORMED THE WORK SAYS

Vladmih Company carried out the repair and landscaping work on the park and provided us with the following response: "We do not know who is now responsible for maintaining the reconstructed facility in good condition. We carried out the work in accordance with the project and handed over the facility for use. According to the contract, the warranty period for such work is five years. We handed the work over to the contracting authority, i.e., the Bălți City Hall. We do not know who manages this facility now.

We finished the work in the winter. At that time, it wasn't necessary to fill Water Lily Pond with water because it would have frozen. We filled the pond later when it warmed up. We tested the pump, and it was working properly. People hired by the manager for this purpose were then to pump the water into the pond. This demonstrated that the water was being collected and pumped properly.

The facilities are operational, including the water purification system. However, the contracting authority must continue to purchase chemicals for water purification and pond maintenance. The project includes purchasing a pump and filter that must be cleaned periodically. If the required pH level is not maintained, the water becomes polluted.

The pond is also connected to the water supply network, but the contracting authority concludes the contract. We know that the Catholic Church in the city has allowed connections to the networks because they belong to the Church. The pond is also connected to the sewerage system. However, concluding the contract for sewerage and water disposal services is not our responsibility.

The contractor offered a five-year warranty on the work provided the facility was used properly. Unfortunately, however, some of the benches were damaged before the facility opened. We had to replace the boards right before opening the facility. Those who committed the acts of vandalism are liable for them, and such acts are not covered by the contractor's warranty.

The project specified the benches that were installed, along with a link to the manufacturer. Due to limited time, decisions regarding project purchases were made quickly.”

OBJECTS INSTALLED WERE NOT TRANSFERRED TO THE MANAGEMENT OF MUNICIPAL LAND USE PLANNING COMPANY

Svetlana Novikova, the director of the municipal enterprise for green spaces and land use planning, informed us that the park's facilities were not transferred to her organization, so it is unclear who is responsible for maintaining them.

“We manage the park, but the facilities installed as part of the project, including the benches, trash cans, and pond, have not yet been handed over to us. On City Day, we filled the pond with water. However, after it became polluted, we drained the pond, cleaned the area, and collected the water lilies. They are now at the summer stage.

Once we officially take over management of the Water Lily Pond, we will address the issue of changing its depth, which the mayor has already raised. It is dangerous. During consultations on this subject, various solutions were proposed, such as installing a fence or making the pond shallower. It is not yet known which solution will be adopted.

As for the benches, I can clearly tell you that we will not take them into our care if they are damaged. We have already received this request, and we have explained that we cannot allocate resources

to repair items that we do not manage. I don't know who chose these benches, but we also consider them unsafe. Recently, we started buying reliable benches. We have installed them on Bulgară and Konev Streets, in Victoria Park, at the bus station, in the BAM neighborhood, and on Alexandru cel Bun Street. Although vandals have overturned them several times, we have only had to replace a damaged board in a few cases. A bench like this, together with a trash can, costs around 10,000 lei," Svetlana Novikova explained.

We requested an interview with **Vasile Stratu**, the chief architect of the project. He promised to answer the questions we sent him via email during our phone conversation. However, he subsequently failed to respond to our phone calls or emails.

EXAMPLE OF A PARK DESIGN IN UNGHENI

For comparison, we analyzed the design of a park in Ungheni, which features a summer theater, a functional pool, a skateboard platform, and courts for volleyball, mini-football, and tennis, as well as a children's playground, bike paths, video surveillance, and newly installed lighting. Repair and renovation work took place here from 2016 to 2020, in five stages. Deputy Mayor **Eduard Balan** explained that the local administration of Ungheni received funds to develop a park named "Little Cluj" thanks to good partnerships with some Romanian cities, especially the municipality of Cluj-Napoca. Contributors included the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, local residents, and the diaspora. The total cost of the work was 14,497,990 lei.

According to the deputy mayor, the City Hall reported all expenses to the donors at each stage.

1. First stage (2016–2017):

- Landscaping of the "Alley of Compatriots" as part of the "With Love for Home" project (Migration and Local Development Project, implemented by UNDP with financial support from the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, locals, and the diaspora).
- Works: paving the alley, installing lighting poles, benches, and trash cans. y Total cost: 1,118,000 lei.

2. Second stage (2017):

- Landscaping of the “Children’s Town” with four play areas for different age groups.
- Paving paths, installing benches, trash cans, planting flowers, installing streetlights.
- Total cost: 4,018,294 lei (contribution from Cluj-Napoca City Hall – 2,052,508 lei).

3. Third stage (2018):

- Landscaping of the central entrance to the park, the fountain, the summer theater, and the “Cluj-Napoca” alley.
- Reconstruction of the administrative building, sanitary facilities, sewage and lighting systems.
- Total cost: 3,770,066 lei (contribution from Cluj-Napoca City Hall – 2,132,622.12 lei).

4. Fourth stage (2019):

- Preparation and installation of surfaces for mini-football, tennis, and volleyball courts.
- Repair of entrances to sports grounds, installation of lighting system.
- Total cost: 3,320,000 lei (contribution from Cluj-Napoca City Hall – 1,898,714.42 lei).

5. Fifth stage (2020):

- Preparation of technical documentation for the construction of the skateboard park.
- Paving the parking lot and access road from Alexandru cel Bun Street.
- Routine repair of the access road lighting system.
- Construction of the skateboard park.
- Total cost: 2,271,630.24 lei (contribution from Cluj-Napoca City Hall – 2,078,000 lei).

As of 1 June 2020, the largest park in Ungheni has been renamed “Little Cluj.”

THE 'DISASTER-CONTRACT'. CHRONOLOGY AND BEHIND- THE-SCENES OF €66 MILLION LAWSUIT, WITH ALLEGATIONS BETWEEN THE CURRENT AND FORMER ADMINISTRATIONS OF THE CHIȘINĂU CITY HALL

**NATALIA ZAHARESCU, MĂRIUȚA NISTOR,
ZIARUL DE GARDĂ, 12 May 2025**

Epamedia SRL, which manages 300 bus stops in Chișinău, is seeking €66 million in damages from Chișinău City Hall in an international arbitration case. The company alleges that the local administration failed to comply with the terms of the 2007 public-private partnership agreement. However, according to the current and previous administrations of Chișinău, the company has also failed to fully comply with its contractual obligations. Both the City Hall and the company reject allegations that they reached 'understandings' to embezzle the municipal budget, claiming they are ready to resolve the issue at the negotiating table.



Ziarul de Gardă presents the chronology of the implementation of a ‘disaster-contract’, as it was called by both Ion Ceban and Dorin Chirtoacă, and the actions and inactions of the capital’s administrations that put Chişinău at risk of losing approximately **1.2 billion lei**.

In mid-April 2025, headlines in the Chişinău press read, “Chişinău City Hall risks losing €66 million,” referring to a contract signed in January 2007 between Chişinău City Hall and Epamedia SRL. This issue sparked widespread public debate.

The day after discussions began about the €66 million that Epamedia SRL is claiming from Chişinău City Hall, the municipality issued a statement accusing other parties involved in administrative proceedings over the years and exonerating the current mayor. The statement does not detail the circumstances that led to the claim, but it does state that the city hall does not recognize the amount.

“[...] Due to the previous administration’s mistakes, the city hall was deprived of millions of lei from the municipal budget. [...] The city hall does not recognize the figure of €66 million claimed by the private partner in this contract. The private partner took into account the gross income lost without considering their operating costs since 2007. [...] This issue has been highly politicized by

councilors, with personal allegations directed at Mayor **Ion Ceban**, who was not involved in this matter. In fact, there is a public-private partnership agreement from 2007 that was allegedly unfulfilled between 2007 and 2020,” the statement said.

A DETRIMENTAL CONTRACT FOR THE MUNICIPALITY?

In January 2007, the Chișinău City Hall and Epamedia SRL signed a public-private partnership agreement. According to the agreement, Epamedia SRL agreed to build and maintain 300 public transportation stations in ‘working order’ for the duration of the agreement. In return, the municipality undertakes to provide the company “with the following, free of charge, for the entire duration of the contract: 1,580 billboards, 600 city lights, city lights at all public transportation stations in Chișinău (with exclusive rights), advertising boxes on poles in Chișinău, five information kiosks, and other advertising media.”

At that time, *Ziarul de Gardă* wrote, “according to experts, the contract causes the Chișinău municipality budget to lose several tens of millions of lei under the current conditions because it does not specify a price for the granted concessions.”

According to the contractual provisions, the 2007 agreement was valid for 10 years, with the possibility of automatic renewal for an additional five years, provided that neither party announced its intention to terminate the agreement at least 12 months prior to its expiration. The contract also stipulated that any disputes would be settled through international arbitration at the Vienna Arbitration Center rather than in national courts. The contract could be terminated if one of the parties failed to fulfill its responsibilities. The company’s main obligation was to construct and maintain the stations, while the municipality’s main obligation was “to authorize the installation and operation of the advertising park for at least 10 years.”

The contract was not terminated in 2017 when it reached its 10-year term. Instead, it was automatically extended for another five years, until 2022. During this time, several administrations succeeded one another at the helm of the municipality.

**PREVIOUS LEADERSHIP, ABOUT THE CONTRACT:
“EPAMEDIA DID NOT CAUSE ANY PROBLEMS DURING MY
MAYORAL TERM.”**

We called **Vasile Ursu**, the acting mayor who signed the contract. He refused to speak with us, claiming that he did not want to ‘rock the boat’.

V. Ursu: Too much time has passed. I don’t want to rock the boat. I’m sorry, but I don’t want to talk about it. I’ve already forgotten what happened back then.

ZdG: However, the repercussions are being felt now.

V. Ursu: Bye, bye!

In June 2007, **Dorin Chirtoacă** became mayor of Chişinău and “inherited this disaster-contract” from the Communists, he told *ZdG*. According to the former mayor, “the communists lobbied” for the signing of the act, which was actually intended “to stifle other companies, destroy competition, and monopolize advertising in Chişinău.” Chirtoacă admits that he refused to fulfill a contractual clause because he considered it ‘abusive’, and that the company would not have filed a claim. He was referring to the provision regarding the allocation of 1,580 advertising spaces to Epamedia SRL.

D. Chirtoacă: Obviously, it was impossible for this company to become a monopoly on the advertising market while I was in charge, so they did not request the 1,500 billboards and accepted the role of competing with everyone else. Therefore, Epamedia SRL did not cause any problems during my mayoral term.

ZdG: You said that Epamedia SRL never requested the 1,580 advertising spaces. However, this was stated in the contract. I would like to know if there was any official correspondence or an annex to the contract that regulates this aspect because contractual provisions are worth more than a verbal agreement.

D. Chirtoacă: You see, I don’t remember. It’s been 15 or 20 years. That means the archive has to be retrieved.

In 2021, **Valeriu Bogdan**, the head of the Legal Department at Chişinău City Hall, stated that Epamedia SRL had waived the contract clause regarding advertising space outside of stations. At a meeting of the Chişinău Municipal Council, he stated that

Epamedia SRL had not fully complied with the contractual terms between 2007 and 2020. Although the company built 300 stations, it did not maintain them, and many have fallen into disrepair. He said that in 2020, the company rebuilt 120 abandoned stations and planned to rebuild another 150 in 2021. "These stations are being built, and they have agreed not to use those spaces (for advertising billboards – editor's note)."

At the same CMC meeting in April 2021, Councilor **Aliona Mandatii**, representing the DA Platform, proposed drafting and adopting an addendum to the 2007 agreement. This addendum would officially confirm that Epamedia SRL was waiving its claim to advertising space on billboards, thus avoiding potential litigation. "This will save us from losing a huge amount of money in court," she said.

However, this additional agreement was never put to a vote.

ION CEBAN'S CHANGING STATEMENTS ABOUT THE CONTRACT WITH "EPAMEDIA"

In November 2019, Ion Ceban took office as mayor and assumed the obligation to fulfill the provisions of a 2007 contract that was still valid. In May 2020, Ceban stated that most bus stations were in a disastrous state after Epamedia SRL, "through a scheme, took over half of the municipality's 546 bus stations in 2007. I have requested the initiation of procedures to terminate contracts with all companies which who have replaced bus stations with commercial pavilions," Ion Ceban wrote on his Facebook page.

In June 2020, Ion Ceban accused Epamedia SRL of "doing nothing to date and leaving the stations in a deplorable state despite the fact that the contract runs until 2022."

By February 2021, the mayor's position had become less definitive. He argued that according to the contract, Epamedia SRL managed 300 bus stations and had the right to place advertisements on them. "This contract stipulates that this company has the right to place advertisements at these 300 stations. Other companies do not have this right. There is no lobbying involved here," the mayor said at the time, although he had previously accused the company of taking over the stations 'through a scheme'.

Meanwhile, Ion Ceban claimed that the 200 refurbished bus stations in Chişinău ‘looked good’ and suggested handing over the remaining bus stations to commercial operators who would be allowed to place advertisements there.

WHY WAS THE ‘DISASTER CONTRACT’ NOT TERMINATED IN 2017?

The first 10-year term of the public-private partnership contract expired in 2017, during Dorin Chirtoacă’s third term as mayor. He informed *ZdG* that the company was bankrupt and anticipated its liquidation and the subsequent return of the stations to the municipality’s ownership. Hence the contract was not terminated when the 10-year term expired.

“Year after year, their business went from bad to worse. At one point, they went bankrupt and asked us to help with day-to-day operations. For instance, some of the stations they managed needed renovations, but they didn’t have the money, so the city hall funded the renovations. Since the company was bankrupt, the issue arose that, at some point, it would be liquidated and all the stations would revert to the city hall. Thus, there would be no question of extending the contract. At that time, in 2016-2017, no one informed me that there was a one-year notice clause for terminating the contract,” Chirtoacă explained.

IS THE CONTRACT IN FORCE OR NOT?

Neither city hall nor company representatives could clearly answer whether the contract is still valid or explain why the stations remain Epamedia SRL’s property. *Ziarul de Gardă* consulted with a lawyer, who wanted to remain anonymous. He explained that the contract could only be extended once, for five years, and not multiple times.

However, in 2021, representatives from the Chişinău City Hall discussed the possibility of extending the contract beyond 2022, when the five-year term, for which it had been extended, expired.

“They (the representatives of Epamedia SRL – editor’s note) said that the investment to modernize all these stations would be around 50 million lei. If they invest and we see that they are acting in good faith, then I don’t see a problem with extending the contract,” said Deputy Mayor **Ilie Ceban** in an interview with TV8 in 2020.

Valeriu Bogdan, the head of the city hall’s legal department, argued in 2021 for automatically extending the contract beyond 2022. At the CMC meeting in April 2021, Bogdan said, “As long as a contract exists and the parties honor their obligations and have no claims against each other, this contract will be considered extended in 2022 under such circumstances.” He argued that, for the contract to terminate in 2022, City Hall had to notify Epamedia SRL by January 2021, but it did not.

The 300 stations leased to Epamedia SRL should have reverted to municipal ownership upon completion of the contract, but this did not happen. The company continues to own them and place advertisements on them.

According to **Serghei Pușcuța**, the administrator of Moldpresa Grup SRL and former Minister of Finance and head of the Tax Authority, the contract expired in 2022 and was not renewed. However, it was not terminated by any document. When asked if the contract was still valid, Pușcuța declined to comment. “It’s a matter of arbitration. The court will decide whether it is valid or invalid, enforceable or unenforceable.” Serghei Pușcuța confirmed that the stations were owned by Epamedia SRL. “Yes, that’s what the contract says. However, at present, they remain on the balance sheet of Epamedia SRL. I cannot comment on the reason why. We are entering the realm of speculation, who thinks what.”

Chișinău’s deputy mayor Ilie Ceban told ZdG that “it is important that this public-private partnership agreement was signed in 2007 for 10 years; subsequently extended for five years more; and indeed, expired in 2022.” Ceban added that Epamedia SRL did not return the stations to city hall management because “we do not want to escalate this conflict.”

Ilie Ceban: These 300 stations have not yet been returned to the city hall’s management because the transaction (the 2022 settlement – editor’s note) was initiated as part of the negotiations.

ZdG: But as long as those negotiations and the settlement were not finalized, and no agreement was signed, why have those bus stations not been returned to the city hall's management two years later?

Ilie Ceban: We believe that, as long as there is a possibility of a settlement, it is to the advantage of City Hall, not the other way around. We do not want to escalate this conflict and prompt the municipality to be liable.

In 2025, Epamedia SRL further benefits from certain provisions of the public-private partnership agreement that expired in 2022. In accordance with the termination clause, Epamedia places advertisements in the 300 stations built by the entity and distributes social advertisements for the Chişinău City Hall.

However, Epamedia SRL violated one of the clauses during the contract period by failing to maintain the stations 'in working order'. ZdG has identified several stations in poor condition that do not comply with the maintenance clause, particularly on Munceşti Street in the capital.

POINT OF DEPARTURE OF THE DISPUTE

On April 22, 2025, Municipal Councilor **Victor Chironda** published an information note from the City Hall legal department on his Facebook page. The note was addressed to Municipal Councilors and informed them that Epamedia SRL was seeking €66 million in damages from Chişinău City Hall in international arbitration. The document shows that, by the end of 2021, the company had invoked the contract clause regarding the provision of 1,580 advertising spaces outside of bus stations. The company accused the Chişinău City Hall of failing to honor its commitments by not providing the spaces. According to the information note, both the city hall and the company agreed that Epamedia SRL had fulfilled its obligations and built the 300 stations.

The city hall requested a legal opinion from the law firm "Efrim, Roşca şi Asociaţii", which confirmed that namely the city hall had not fulfilled its contractual obligations. Additionally, a settlement agreement was drafted in 2022, but it never came to fruition.

In November 2024, Mayor Ion Ceban received a preliminary request from Epamedia SRL, seeking €66 million in compensation. The mayor formed a working group that concluded this issue fell under the jurisdiction of the municipal councilors, not the mayor. In March 2025, City Hall received an arbitration notice and a request for the local authority to appoint an arbitrator from the representative of Epamedia SRL. The deadline was 22 April 2025. However, the municipal council had not convened by that date, so the city hall did not appoint an arbitrator.

The memo from the Legal Department highlights the need to hire a lawyer and requests “the urgent involvement of decision-makers in resolving disputes with Epamedia SRL in the municipality’s best interest.”

“A COMMON SCAM TO EMBEZZLE FUNDS FROM THE CITY BUDGET THROUGH LEGAL CHANNELS”

Former capital city mayor Dorin Chirtoacă believes this allegedly is an ‘understanding’ since Epamedia SRL’s claims arose after Moldpresa Grup took over the company.

“Through Moldpresa Grup, Bilinkis is buying a bankrupt company (Epamedia SRL – editor’s note). Why would you buy a bankrupt company? Do you have too much money and want to throw it out the window? This makes me think that there is some kind of understanding involved. We cannot rule out the possibility that this could be a joint scam to embezzle funds from the city budget through legal channels,” Chirtoacă alleges.

Similar allegations were made by PAS councilors within the CMC during a 1 May briefing with **Lilian Carp**, PAS MP. They accused Mayor Ion Ceban of colluding with Epamedia SRL to embezzle municipal funds.

Serghei Pușcuța, the administrator of Moldpresa Grup, the company that owns Epamedia SRL, described the allegations as ‘insinuations’ and ‘irresponsible assumptions’ when asked by *ZdG*.

“You are pushing me into a realm of statements, assessments,

and emotions. I am a technical person who focuses on contracts, figures, and results. As for insinuations and assumptions, that's a political and competitive arena with which I'm not familiar. However, it seems irresponsible to me. Anyone who believes that the law has been violated must submit an appropriate request to the relevant authority, which will review it and provide a legal assessment. That is why I do not want to comment at all. I have no kind words when I hear such assessments," Pușcuța said.

EPAMEDIA, FAVOURED BY THE CHIȘINĂU CITY HALL?

In 2007, when the public-private partnership agreement was signed with the Chișinău City Hall, Epamedia SRL was owned by EPAMEDIA – EUROPÄISCHE PLAKAT- UND AUSSEN MEDIEN GMBH, a company registered in Austria. The company filed for insolvency proceedings in 2010. These proceedings were terminated in March 2019 by court order. The document mentions a €4.3 million debt owed to **Costin Ciobanu**, a Romanian citizen. The debt was converted into shares of Epamedia SRL's stock, and Ciobanu became the company's owner with a 98.97% stake. In the summer of 2020, Moldpresa Grup SRL, which is owned by **Alexandr Bilinkis** and **Mihail Bux**, took over this stake.

In November 2020, TV8 reported that advertising company representatives accused the Chișinău City Hall of favoring Epamedia SRL. The city hall drafted new advertising regulations requiring the removal of all billboards from the capital's streets, while allowing advertisements to remain in stations repaired by Epamedia SRL.

In 2022, PAS councilors within the CMC accused Ion Ceban of allowing Epamedia SRL, acquired in 2020 by Moldpresa Grup SRL, to install 75 kiosks at public transportation stations in Chișinău without a tender.

In response, Moldpresa Grup SRL stated that it was the only company to participate in all five of the Chișinău City Hall's tenders for the right to locate commercial units, resulting in its award of 11 commercial locations.

EPAMEDIA REQUIREMENTS: ADVERTISING SPACE

Alexandr Bilinkis, the owner of Moldpresa Grup, refused to answer questions related to the dispute between Epamedia SRL and the Chișinău City Hall.

“On the advice of our lawyers, we will not comment on our relationship with the defendant until the end of the trial. All relevant information is publicly available at City Hall, the Public Services Agency, and so on,” Bilinkis replied.

Serghei Pușcuța, the administrator of Moldpresa Grup SRL (the company that owns Epamedia SRL), told *ZdG* that the period for which €66 million in compensation is being sought is 2007–2022—i.e., 15 years, two years longer than the period mentioned by the Chișinău City Hall. The City Hall announced that the period in question was 2007–2020 and that Mayor Ion Ceban allegedly had ‘no involvement’ in this matter.

When asked about the basis for the €66 million claimed by Epamedia SRL in international arbitration against the city hall, Pușcuța said it was based on a report on economic activity, investments, and lost profits prepared by an independent audit company and submitted to the city hall.

“We believe that Epamedia SRL has fully fulfilled its contractual obligations by building 300 stations in Chișinău. However, the municipality of Chișinău has not provided Epamedia SRL with the equivalent value of this contract, which was to make advertising locations available,” Pușcuța said.

The head of the Legal Assistance Department mentioned that Epamedia SRL was requesting compensation for investments made in stations in 2007, as well as for losses resulting from the failure to provide advertising panels and for additional investments made between 2021 and 2022.

WHAT ARE THE REQUESTS OF EPAMEDIA SRL AND THE SOLUTIONS OF THE MUNICIPALITY? SILENCE AND HESITATION – THE RESPONSE TO ZDG QUESTIONS

Information about the €66 million dispute between the city hall

and Epamedia SRL was made public on 22 April. However, Mayor Ion Ceban did not comment on the case for two weeks.

At the city council meeting on 5 May, *ZdG* asked the mayor to explain why he had not terminated the contract or complied with its provisions to avoid dissatisfaction on the part of Epamedia SRL. In response, Ion Ceban blamed previous governments and evaded *ZdG*'s direct questions about the dispute. He did not explain why City Hall said that Epamedia SRL's claims were for the years 2007–2020 while company representatives claim the period extends to 2022. He also failed to explain why the stations set up by Epamedia SRL remained the company's property when the contract stipulates that they should revert to City Hall ownership upon completion. Additionally, he failed to explain why his statements about how Epamedia SRL fulfilled its obligations changed after Moldpresa Grup SRL took over the company.

Ion Ceban: I am glad that you and many others are finally exposing the skeletons of former governments that I have talked about repeatedly. (...) From 2007 to 2019, no one asked any questions about this issue. All the stations looked like public toilets—completely destroyed. Today, we have 700 stations, 300 of which are managed by Epamedia SRL, and the remaining stations are managed by the Municipality of Chişinău. (...) Yes, we have a dispute. This dispute will progress as a lawsuit and an action by our colleagues from the Legal Department.

ZdG: However, the damages claimed by the company also relate to the period during which you were mayor. You have not answered this question.

Ion Ceban: You are not hearing me.

ZdG: I can hear you very well.

Ion Ceban: There is a dispute, and in this context, I will ask the Legal Department to explain.

(...)

ZdG: When you took office as mayor, you said that the stations were in critical condition and that the contract was fraudulent. However, after Moldpresa Grup SRL took over the company, you said that they had the right to place advertisements. Why did your position change?

Ion Ceban: We will answer all of these questions at a press conference because many of them are taken out of context, and some do not accurately reflect reality.

ZdG: It would be good to clarify this, as it is still unclear on what basis Epamedia SRL is claiming this €66 million compensation, which clauses the company claims have not been fulfilled, and the city hall's stance on the matter. If the city hall believes it has fulfilled all the clauses, why not go to arbitration?

Ion Ceban: I hope you can hear me. We have a disaster-contract from 2007, and we are currently involved in litigation.

Epamedia SRL is also open to negotiations. "We are ready at any stage if the authorities are open to it," Serghei Pușcuța said. He did not want to discuss what could be negotiated in detail, whether it be a sum of money or the provision of advertising space. "This is a matter of litigation. (...) It is a very complex question with many angles that need to be discussed, and I cannot answer it."

During the same city hall meeting on 5 May 2025, **Valeriu Bogdan**, the head of the Legal Assistance Department, emphasized that this issue could not be resolved by the mayor. "This is not about Ion Ceban. It's clear that councilors and the media are trying to politicize this issue. If the mayor had the authority or competence to resolve this dispute, it would have been resolved in 2020," Bogdan said.

He added that a new draft decision had been drawn up and would be submitted to the first Chișinău Municipal Council meeting. This comes at a time when the CMC has not met since the beginning of 2025. If the CMC does not approve the draft, Bogdan added that "city hall will take all necessary measures to ensure that the budget is not affected." When asked why the city hall did not appoint an arbitrator, Bogdan said that the city hall's goal was to settle the dispute outside of court. "We are hopeful that we will achieve this result and avoid arbitration," he added. He also said that a negotiation proposal had been made in 2021 but that Epamedia SRL had not yet submitted a request for negotiations.

According to Serghei Pușcuța, 22 April 2025 was the second deadline given by Epamedia SRL to Chișinău City Hall to appoint an arbitrator. Since the city hall failed to do so, Epamedia SRL will

ask the arbitration court to appoint another arbitrator and will pay all expenses for the three arbitrators. After the arbitration decision is rendered, the expenses will be apportioned.

**EXPERT IN INTERNATIONAL ARBITRATION:
"THIS IS A STRATEGIC DISADVANTAGE"**

Serghei Covali, a lawyer who specializes in international arbitration, explained that if the Chişinău City Hall did not appoint an arbitrator, then one would be appointed by an authority established by the parties. "This is a strategic disadvantage. A party participating in arbitration always wants to appoint a trustworthy arbitrator. This does not mean that the person will be biased, but it's a strategic issue best not overlooked," the lawyer emphasized.

At a press conference on 6 May 2025, Mayor Ion Ceban announced that he would convene a CMC meeting on 15 May 2025. ZdG officially requested that Chişinău City Hall answer questions related to this topic, including those concerning the 2007 contract and other necessary documents to understand the context, but has not yet received a response.

EFFICIENCY ON PAPER, DEFICIENCIES IN REALITY. HOW DIMITRIE CANTEMIR HIGH SCHOOL IN BĂLȚI WAS RENOVATED WITH EUROPEAN FUNDS

DORIN RUSU,
TV NORD, 10 October 2025

The renovations carried out at the Dimitrie Cantemir Theoretical High School in Bălți were inaugurated with great fanfare in 2023 and presented as a successful example of European investment in the Republic of Moldova. However, behind the optimistic façade of the inauguration event lies unfinished work, technical non-conformities, and a photovoltaic system that still does not work, even two years after being put into operation.



"WORKS THAT SHOULD BECOME STANDARD"

On 21 September 2023, a ribbon-cutting ceremony was held at the Dimitrie Cantemir Theoretical High School in Bălți. An information plaque was unveiled, announcing that the school had undergone renovations to become more energy efficient with the support of the European Union (EU). The building had been modernized with a new roof, thermally insulated walls, windows replaced, a refurbished heating system, and hot and cold water taps in renovated bathrooms. According to estimates, the school was expected to consume 547 MWh, which is 60% less energy, and emit 125 tons less CO₂ annually.

Those present at the inauguration included the then Minister of Infrastructure and Regional Development **Andrei Spânu**; the European Union Ambassador **Janis Mazeiks**; and the Deputy Head of the German Diplomatic Mission in Chișinău **Peter Bushman**. They all spoke in exclusively positive terms about the success of the project. Andrei Spânu said that the work done at the high school "should set the standard for our country—a standard we should strive to achieve."

A press release published by the Northern Regional Development Agency (ADR Nord), the institution responsible for implementing the project, stated: "With the support of the European Union, over 1,000

students, teachers, and support staff at Dimitrie Cantemir High School in Bălți are enjoying improved study conditions and a more comfortable work environment.”

The “Improving the Energy Efficiency of Dimitrie Cantemir Theoretical High School” project cost **24 million lei**. The Bălți City Hall added an additional **4.6 million lei** for interior work. “Sarco Engineering” SRL, a company founded and managed by **Mihail Stratan**, won the bid to carry out the work but did not complete the project. According to Mihail Stratan, his company had completed about 80% of the work when ADR Nord unilaterally terminated the contract, forcing them to abandon the project. “We did the thermal insulation, the roof, the carpentry, and the ventilation system. We left, let’s say, not in the nicest way. The contract was terminated by ADR Nord on their own initiative. We are currently in litigation and have appealed to the Northern Court of Appeals. We hope to win the case,” Mihail Stratan explains.

He also states that, in 2022, the government permitted adjustments to public contract prices due to inflation. Sarco Engineering SRL then requested an additional 800,000 lei above the previously agreed-upon amount of 3.9 million lei, but ADR Nord rejected the request. Sarco Engineering SRL then filed for insolvency, leaving ADR Nord owing approximately 3 million lei.

To complete the remaining work, ADR Nord signed a contract with SRL “Am Sisteme” on 11 May 2023. The contract is worth 5.9 million lei, which is 1.2 million lei more than the additional amount requested by Sarco Engineering to finish the work. ADR Nord did not hold a public procurement tender but rather signed a contract for the work, meaning the work was carried out directly in exchange for an agreed-upon price. “Am Sisteme” SRL completed the work within a few months, and ADR Nord accepted it without objection.

ENERGY AUDIT CONDUCTED OVER A YEAR REVEALS TECHNICAL DEFICIENCIES

In December 2024, more than a year after the start of construction, the Bălți Directorate of Education, Youth, and Sports commissioned an energy audit of the high school building.

Alexandru Roșca, head of the Preschool, Primary, Secondary, and High School Education Section of the Bălți Education Directorate, explained to TV Nord, “The audit was important in order to determine how effective the work carried out was and to ensure the sustainability of this project.”

After four months of checks, the audit team—made up of experts from two specialized firms, one from the Republic of Moldova and the other from Romania—discovered several technical nonconformities in the work performed. Below are some of the findings included in the audit report consulted by the TV Nord team.

- Photos taken by experts show that unsuitable materials were used when installing parts of the roof. One metal sheet differs from the rest of the roof and appears to have been added later. However, it has a smaller diameter than necessary for the section on which it was placed;
- The lightning rod damaged the roof on which it was installed;
- The building’s insulation was found to be deteriorating due to problems with the insulation;
- Deficiencies were found in the building’s ventilation system and irregularities in the heating system’s automation and maintenance. According to the auditors, these issues lead to instability in indoor comfort and thermal balance;
- The photovoltaic system, which was expected to substantially reduce electricity bills, was never put into operation.

The institution’s director **Angela Murzac** confirmed the audit findings but called them ‘misunderstandings’. “Following this audit, there were some, let’s say, misunderstandings. During the project, two construction companies were working on it. It’s actually more about electricity. I will open the brackets because electricity cannot be supplied in parts. In other words, it must be put into operation throughout the entire building unanimously. Of course, there is also the issue of solar batteries, which cannot be installed because the project is incomplete. So, it has not been finished,” Angela Murzac told TV Nord.

Following the receipt of the audit report, the Education Directorate of Bălți City Hall claimed to have organized “a joint meeting with all companies involved in the construction and renovation of the high school.”

Alexandru Roșca added, “These shortcomings have been brought to their attention, and the companies will soon remedy them.”

On 17 September 2025, the Bălți Education Directorate requested information from the National Energy Regulatory Agency (ANRE) regarding the photovoltaic system at the Dimitrie Cantemir Theoretical High School in Bălți. ANRE responded that they had not received a request for a certificate of conformity to operate the photovoltaic power plant installed at Dimitrie Cantemir High School in Bălți. ANRE also mentioned that the contractor’s statement contained incorrect data regarding the number and power of the photovoltaic modules.

We tried to find out if the two companies that carried out the work would agree to fix the irregularities identified by the auditors. Mihail Stratan, the administrator of Sarco Engineering SRL, said he would only address the irregularities identified in the food building. He claimed the other contractor, “Am Sisteme SRL”, was responsible for the rest. Employees at the company’s headquarters told us that Director **Andrei Mereacre** was not in the office. When we called the contact numbers we found, someone answered and said they would ask the director to call us back as soon as possible. However, as of publication time, Andrei Mereacre had not contacted TV Nord journalists.

After several requests, ADR Nord provided us with a written response in which they claim to have contracted another company to complete the work and prevent it from being stopped due to the insolvency of SRL “Sarco Engineering.” When asked why it did not hold a public procurement tender, ADR North replied that the process of contracting the second company was carried out in accordance with EU regulations. Regarding the acceptance of substandard work, agency representatives say that, to ensure quality, they requested an expert opinion from the National Technical Supervision Inspectorate, which was issued. In the case of the photovoltaic station, ADR Nord says the obligation to put it into operation lies with the beneficiary, i.e., the Bălți City Hall.

We would like to remind you that the “Increasing the Energy Efficiency of the Dimitrie Cantemir Theoretical High School in Bălți” project was funded by the European Union and carried out by ADR Nord and GIZ Moldova as part of the “Modernization of Local Public Services” program. The ADR Nord was the institution that accepted

the final works, which cost approximately 24 million lei. The Bălți City Hall contributed an additional 4.6 million lei for the education institution's interior renovation.

Shortly after the investigation was published, ADR Nord issued a statement describing the material as 'biased' and claiming that it favored "Sarco Engineering" SRL, a company with which ADR Nord is in litigation. In an interview with a local media outlet, the agency's director **Maria Prisăcari** provided a series of explanations, stating that the work had been carried out in accordance with procedures and that the post-execution energy audit had not identified any deficiencies. She added that the problems with the photovoltaic system were due to the Bălți City Hall's failure to renew the permit.

The Bălți City Hall responded by indirectly confirming that the photovoltaic system was not operational. However, they claimed that work was underway to complete the necessary commissioning documentation. For informational purposes, the City Hall sent us an updated technical report prepared by a European energy manager (IHK) **Denis Roibu** at the request of the City Hall on October 15, 2025. The report states that, after analyzing all the documents and arguments presented by the parties involved at the working meeting convened by the Bălți Education Directorate in August 2025, it was found that:

- the testing and commissioning work was carried out in 2024, which was almost a year after the work was accepted;
- the documentation for ANRE was incomplete when it was received;
- the contractor was contractually responsible for testing, training, and connection; and
- the exclusive attribution of guilt to the Bălți City Hall is not supported by documents.

ROADS DAMAGED LESS THAN A YEAR AFTER BEING REPAIRED IN REZINA, DESPITE FIVE-YEAR WARRANTY

ANDREI BORDIAN,
REZINAINOBIECTIV.MD, 21 November 2025

In 2024, the Rezina District Council allocated over 8 million lei to repair seven local roads. These include six short sections, each approximately 400 meters long, and one 580-meter section. According to the contracts, the contractors offered a five-year warranty for each repaired section. However, the first signs of deterioration appeared on some sections shortly after they were inaugurated.



WHO WON THE BIDS?

At its regular meeting on 29 March 2024, the Rezina District Council approved the program for the repair of public roads in the district for 2024. Approximately two months later, the council published an announcement initiating the public procurement procedure for the repair works, which have an estimated total value of **8,342,676.67 lei**, excluding VAT. The program included repairs to four sections of roads leading to the villages of Tarasova, Gordinești, Otac, and Slobozia-Horodiște; two sections of the road connecting the villages of Mateuți and Boșernița, Mincenii de Jos-Mincenii de Sus; and a section of the road in the center of the village of Țahnăuți. The deadline for completion of the work was 31 December 2024.

A total of seven companies participated in the public procurement procedure, and three companies were selected to carry out the work.

Amon-Trade SRL won the contract to build the road between Mateuți and Boșernița. The company laid a 6-cm layer of asphalt concrete on the road. The same company worked on the access roads to the villages of Otac and Slobozia-Horodiște, using a different method: 15 cm of vibro-rolled reinforced concrete. For these works, the company was paid **2,040,825.69 lei** (including VAT) from the public budget.

Metnox SRL was responsible for modernizing the 580-meter access road to Tarasova. A 6-centimeter layer of asphalt concrete was poured, costing **1,156,631.82 lei** (including VAT).

Most of the funds — **4,686,276.71 lei**, including VAT — went to GENESIS International, which was awarded three sections: Mincenii de Jos–Mincenii de Sus, the access road to Gordești, and a section of road in the center of Țahnăuți. The contractor used the same structure for all of these sections: a 12-cm layer of crushed stone covered with 4 cm of asphalt concrete.

The Rezina District Council informed us that, following the procurement procedures and designating the final winner for each object (road section), construction contracts were concluded that stipulated all obligations regarding the execution of the works. The local authorities claim that they monitored and verified the process at all stages in accordance with the specifications.

SLOPPY WORK ON THE ROADS IN OTAC AND SLOBOZIA-HORODIȘTE VILLAGES

Less than a year after the repairs were made, the access roads to the villages of Otac and Slobozia-Horodiște began to crack and deteriorate visibly, and potholes appeared. These two 400-meter sections are now in terrible condition, as if the road workers had never been there.

In August 2025, **Anatolie Cucerenco**, the director of Amon-Trade SRL, informed us that the work had been carried out in accordance with the contracts and specifications approved. He also claimed that the company monitored the work and repaired any shortcomings on its own initiative.

When asked how he assessed the quality of his work, Cucerenco replied, “Evaluating your own work means viewing it subjectively rather than impartially. Quality is determined objectively through the control of the person in charge and acceptance reports from the contracting authority.”

We also requested the Otac Mayor’s Office’s opinion on the quality of the work, even though the office was not financially or management-wise responsible for this project, as the road belongs to the district council. Mayor of Otac **Igor Duca** confirmed that the work was

completed in November 2024. In his official response, he informed us that no complaints or comments had been received about the quality of the road. However, during a telephone conversation shortly before receiving the official response, the mayor admitted that he had already called the company and asked them to repair the road. He said that ‘the guys had agreed’.

A similar situation exists on the Slobozia-Horodiște section of road, where the same company carried out the work according to specifications by laying a 15-cm-thick layer of vibro-rolled reinforced concrete. Less than a year later, the road in Slobozia-Horodiște looks almost identical to the one in Otac, and the patches appear to be made of the same poor-quality material.

In a new official response, Anatolie Cucerenco, the director of Amon-Trade SRL, informed us that it was not classic reinforced concrete but rather vibro-rolled reinforced concrete that was used as a base layer. This was the solution that the beneficiary applied and tendered. Regarding the concrete patches on the roads in Otac and Slobozia-Horodiște that have developed cracks since then, Cucerenco offered the following explanation: “An innovative mixture for repairing concrete surfaces was imported specifically for internal testing at the expense of Amon-Trade SRL. No budget allocations were made for this test. The goal was to evaluate a potential solution for repairing old concrete roads.”

Teodor Cuculescu, the president of the Rezina district and chairman of the commission responsible for accepting completed works, says one cause of deterioration could be the anti-skid material spread on public roads in the winter. This material contains salt, which accelerates the degradation of vibro-rolled reinforced concrete. “We will remedy this situation with the asphalt layer. Work is planned for 2026. Before then, the company will repair all the areas affected. Then, we will lay the asphalt layer, and everything will be perfect,” the president says.

When asked if the district council would continue to work with Amon-Trade SRL, the district president responded that such problems could arise with any company using the same technology. “I don’t want to blame the company. The same problem would probably have arisen if someone else had used the same technology. The company’s goal is to make money. Our goal is to build the road. That’s where the conflict

lies. They want to build the road with as little money as possible, but we want to build it to the highest standard. We want to do as much as possible with as little money as possible,” Teodor Cuculescu says.

THE CONTRACTOR REMEDIED THE IRREGULARITIES IN GORDINEȘTI AFTER JOURNALISTS REPORTED THE DETERIORATION OF THE ROAD.

Cracks and unevenness appeared on a section of the access road to the village of Gordinești, following the work carried out by “GENESIS International” SRL. To remind you that a 12-cm-thick layer of crushed stone was laid on a 400-meter section of the road and covered with a 4-cm-thick layer of asphalt concrete.

In July 2025, **Vitalii Mrug**, the general director of GENESIS International SRL, stated that he was aware that cracks had appeared on the access road to the village of Gordinești during the period of operation, covering an area of approximately 25 m²: “Their appearance was made possible by heavy rainfall and the inability of the gutters on this section of the road to drain all the water. This caused the roadside to erode and allowed water to penetrate the road’s foundation.” After hearing Vitalie Mrug’s explanation, we inspected the damaged section of road. We were unable to find any gutters or other drainage elements that could have absorbed the rainwater. Without these features, the water flowed freely onto the sides of the road, eroding the supporting layer and accelerating the deterioration of the road surface.

District President Teodor Cuculescu said this company would address the nonconformities that have arisen. “It’s important that we resolve the situation and that companies act in good faith. Believe me, this situation is most uncomfortable for me because I am the one who signs the documents,” Cuculescu said.

In July 2025, Vitalii Mrug, the CEO of GENESIS International SRL, informed us that the workers would return to this section of the road and resolve the issue promptly. “These defects did not arise from poor workmanship. They arose because the gutters on this section of road had not been cleaned or reinforced. We will remedy the situation as soon as possible,” Vitalii Mrug assured us.

When I went back to the site on 31 October 2025, I discovered

that the section of road was still cracked and bumpy, showing that the problem had not been ‘fixed’ by that day. I notified the Rezina District Council and sent a request to GENESIS International SRL. On 19 November 2025, the company informed us that the issues with the access road to Gordinești village had been resolved and provided us with several photos as proof.

ACCEPTANCE REPORTS: DO THEY EXIST OR NOT?

On 14 July 2025, we requested copies of the final acceptance reports for the seven roads from the Rezina District Council. We were told that, according to the law, “final acceptance of construction takes place only after the warranty period expires, in accordance with the contract stipulations.” These documents are therefore drawn up five years after the completion of the work and expiration of the warranty period.

We requested reports from the companies that carried out the work. Of those companies, only GENESIS International SRL sent us a report upon completing the work on the road connecting the villages of Mincenii de Jos and Mincenii de Sus, the access road to the village of Gordinești, and the road from Țahnăuți.

The document was drafted on 4 September 2024, and signed by the acceptance committee members on 23 September 2024. Each member applied their electronic signatures.

On 3 November 2025, we requested the acceptance reports from the district council upon completion of the work on all seven roads. This time, we were told that “during the execution of the works reports were drawn up on the hidden works and, where necessary, on the completion of the works with the objections that had arisen in order to have them removed” but we were not provided with copies of these documents.

On 14 November 2025, we presented this request to Teodor Cuculescu, the president of Rezina district, who confirmed that the acceptance reports existed and that we would receive them via email. As of the publication of this article, however, we have not received them.

Journalists from *Rezina în Obiectiv* monitored the other four roads repaired by the Rezina District Council as part of the 2024 District Public Road Repair Program. Upon initial inspection, no cracks or other irregularities were observed.

FROM PROMISES OF MODERNIZATION TO FINANCIAL COLLAPSE. THE STORY OF TWO LOANS SUPPOSED TO MODERNIZE BĂLȚI WATER AND SEWAGE COMPANY

DORIN RUSU,
TV NORD, 24 November 2025

Two loans totaling \$4.5 million, taken from the World Bank to modernize the water supply system managed by the municipal company Regia „Apă-Canal Bălți,” have become a burden for the state. The company has gone bankrupt, so the Ministry of Finance is repaying the loan. Following revitalization, Regia „Apă-Canal Bălți” will repay its debts to the Ministry. If the company fails to do so, Bălți City Hall will be responsible for the payments. This has not happened yet, but the risk remains. Through this investigation, we will uncover how the promise of modernization has turned into a maze of losses, debts, and unfulfilled



MILLIONS GONE – BETWEEN LEAKS AND DEBTS

The city of Bălți's water supply system was built at the beginning of the last century and expanded and improved during the Soviet period. On 21 December 1992, the Municipal Company Regia "Apă-Canal Bălți" was founded by the vote of the local councilors in Bălți, and it took over the administration of the city's aqueduct. Due to cracks in the worn-out aqueduct, which has over 260 kilometers of pipes, 60% of the water purchased by the company from "Acva Nord Soroca" has leaked in recent decades.

In 2006, Regia "Apă-Canal Bălți" managed the sewerage system as well and made the decision to take out a World Bank loan to modernize the water supply system for consumers. Two loan agreements were signed: one in 2006 and another in 2009. "Based on Loan Agreements No. 3763 and No. 4314, which were concluded between the Republic of Moldova and the World Bank, the Ministry of Finance signed a Subsidiary Credit Agreement on 31 January 2006, and the Re-lending Agreement No. 5 on 26 June 2009, with Regia "Apă-Canal Bălți," for a total amount of US\$4.5 million, within the framework of water supply and sanitation projects," the

Ministry of Finance informed us in November 2025. The institution stated that the loans “had been offered on favorable terms for 30 years. This included a six-year grace period and final repayment installments in 2033 and 2039, with an interest rate of 1.5% per year through a re-lending mechanism, without guarantees from the state.”

Both loans were intended to address significant issues, such as renovating sections of the water supply and sewerage systems to prevent failure with every change in temperature. However, the situation has not changed.

EQUIPMENT PURCHASED BUT NOT USED

In August 2025, **Vitalie Ungureanu**, the technical director of Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți,” showed us one of the company’s garages. Various equipment purchased with World Bank loans is stored there on cold, dusty shelves. Some of this equipment has never been used and will never be used. “As you can see, this is where the materials purchased from the World Bank project are stored. They were intended for use in reducing water losses. Even when I took office in 2023, there were over two kilometers of unused pipes. Currently, we only have 530 meters left. We are trying to use it to reduce water loss. This should have been done many years ago. Those who did not act should be ashamed. Now, everyone is asking why our rates are so high. It’s because we have 60% losses. We have losses of 60% because the necessary tasks of a water and sewerage company were not completed on time,” Vitalie Ungureanu explains. He adds, “It’s a crime to take out a loan and keep the money locked up. But the loan still has to be repaid.”

Ghenadii Șmulșchii, the deputy mayor of Bălți who previously served on this company’s board of directors, confirms that a stock-taking revealed unnecessary purchases of materials: “When I was on the Board of Directors at Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți” in 2016, we took stock of the materials purchased with that money. Yes, at that time, there were materials worth several million lei on Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți’s” territory. They were there; they didn’t disappear. Some materials were used and pipes were purchased. The water main in

District 8 was replaced and some work was done with this loan. However, among the purchased materials were materials that were never used and never will be.” When asked how he would explain the purchase of those materials, Ghenadii Șmulskii replied, “You have to ask those who took out the loan. I think they had a feasibility study and someone looked into the issues and made decisions.”

After the Ministry of Finance’s Financial Inspection conducted an audit in May and June of 2017, the CNA searched the company and announced that approximately **20 million lei** had been embezzled between 2013 and 2016. Subsequently, former members of the company’s management were charged with various acts of corruption.

On 4 September 2018, additional agreements were signed to restructure the company’s debts and extend the loan repayment term by seven years. This occurred after it was found that the company remained in a difficult financial situation and was unable to honor its loan commitments, as we were informed by the Ministry of Finance and the Bălți City Hall.

NEW ADMINISTRATOR: “MY QUESTION IS, HOW IS THIS COMPANY STILL OPERATING?”

In 2020, the municipal company Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți” officially went into insolvency following a court decision on 9 December. On 25 November 2022, the court appointed **Ion Mămăligă** as the company’s new administrator. He claims that when he took office, there were few documents showing how the money borrowed from the World Bank had been managed. He says that the institution’s accounting records lacked primary documents proving what purchases had been made, and that many documents had disappeared over time. “What I found here... I don’t know. I have worked with companies in difficult situations before because we only work with companies that have problems, whether they are financial or economic. But what I found here... My question is, how is this company still operating?”

According to the administrator, the company is doing everything possible to hold those responsible for the debt accumulation

accountable and recover the money: “We filed a claim in court pursuant to Articles 247 and 248 of the Insolvency Law to collect this debt from the founder and former management of the municipal company. They were in charge of this company two years before insolvency proceedings began. This application is now pending before the insolvency court.”

OBLIGATIONS TO THE WORLD BANK ARE PAID BY THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE

Although the company currently lacks the financial capacity to meet its loan repayment obligations, it is paying installments regularly to the World Bank. The Ministry of Finance makes these payments, and Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți” accumulates debt to the Ministry in turn.

Upon our request, the Bălți City Hall, the founder of Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți,” provided us with the following data regarding the status of loan repayments: “According to Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți’s” debt verification document to the Ministry of Finance, the balance of outstanding loans as of 31 December 2024, is as follows:

- for the loan contracted in 2006 – US\$2.48 million, including US\$360,600 with expired repayment terms;
- for the loan contracted in 2009 – US\$1.45 million, including debts with expired payment terms – US\$161,400.”

In turn, the Ministry of Finance presented us with more recent data on debts. “As of 31 October 2025, Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți” owes the Ministry of Finance US\$3,937,029.25 for re-credited loans. Of this amount, US\$632,029.25 is owed for loans with expired payment terms, including the principal loan amount of US\$625,000.00 and interest of US\$7,029.25.”

The Ministry of Finance informed us that, since the company became insolvent on 9 December 2020, “the calculation of payments related to loans granted by the Ministry of Finance to the debtor has been suspended in accordance with Article 75(4) of Insolvency Law No. 149/2012. The Ministry of Finance’s third-rank unsecured claims, validated in accordance with the Insolvency Law procedure, will be honored according to the Restructuring Plan

approved at the Creditors' Meeting on 25 July 2023 and confirmed by the Bălți Court with premises in Fălești on 14 June 2024.”

Thus, the Ministry of Finance assures that the payment schedule to the World Bank remains unaffected by Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți” insolvency. The state budget provides the funds for the installment payments on a staggered basis. In response to our request, the Ministry of Finance told us, “These payments are forecast annually in the state budget and do not affect the stability of public finances, as the loans are granted on concessional terms, such as low interest rates and extended repayment periods.”

“IF APĂ CANAL BĂLȚI DOESN'T PAY, THE CITY HALL WILL”

Administrator Ion Mămăligă claims that Regia “Apă-Canal Bălți” can operate normally and will be able to pay off its debts, including loans. However, if the company fails to do so, the debts will revert to the city hall. Deputy Mayor **Ghenadie Șmulșchii** confirms this: “If Regia ‘Apă-Canal Bălți’ does not pay, the City Hall and the Ministry of Finance will.” The Ministry of Finance noted in its response to TV Nord, “The Bălți City Hall issued payment guarantees in favor of the Ministry of Finance, whereby it undertook to pay, at the first request of the Ministry, the financial obligations not fulfilled by the municipal company under the refinancing agreements concluded.” No such requests have been made so far.

PREVENTIVE MEASURES IMPLEMENTED BY THE MINISTRY OF FINANCE

In order to prevent similar situations from compromising investment projects and recurring, the Ministry of Finance announces that it has begun implementing a set of measures:

- rigorous assessment of new investment projects worth over €10 million by the Interministerial Committee for Strategic Planning (CIPS), with prior validation by the Council for Sustainable Development Coordination (CCDD);
- analyzing the eligibility and creditworthiness of beneficiaries

- prior to re-crediting, in conjunction with the relevant ministries;
- requesting collateral (pledges on immovable/movable property or other instruments provided by law) to ensure loan repayment;
 - enforcement procedures through the State Tax Service (suspension of banking operations, collection orders, forced debt collection) in case of non-fulfillment of obligations;
 - strict monitoring of project implementation by line ministries, including the use of funds and the quality of work;
 - strengthening institutional capacities to align the regulatory framework with international standards on external debt management.

FROM STUDENT LUNCHES TO BIDDING SCHEMES: LOOPHOLES FOR PUBLIC MONEY TO LEAK AWAY AT BRICENI EDUCATION DIRECTORATE

IULIANA VOLCOVA,
NORDNEWS.MD, 25 November 2025

According to an audit conducted in the summer of 2025 by the State Financial Control Inspectorate, over 6.5 million lei from the Education, Youth, and Sports Directorate of Briceni district budget were mismanaged in 2023-2024. Prosecutors have already taken note of the money allocated for children's meals, fuel purchases, and school repairs that 'evaporated' within a system of falsified contracts, accounts, and signatures. We are investigating to trace some of the channels through which public money was diverted into private pockets.



WARNING SIGNS IGNORED

In September 2024, the Briceni District Council allocated 100,000 lei for an audit of the Education, Youth, and Sports Directorate. **Dorin Pavaloi**, who was vice president of the district at the time and is now a Socialist Party member of Parliament, says that there were sufficient suspicions regarding the inappropriate use of public funds at that time: “From 2019 to 2023, I served as the district’s vice president, overseeing education, health, and social affairs. Even then, I sounded the alarm. We addressed the issue with both the district president and the relevant authorities. Believe me, without support, it’s practically impossible to change anything. There were some tacit agreements, or perhaps even personal interests, involved in this story. Everything we talked about back then has now come true. But only too late.”

Following the audit conducted by Consulting-Modern SRL, numerous irregularities were identified that would have caused significant damage. According to the auditors’ estimates, the total value of the losses and lost revenue amounted to about 2.4 million lei.

No.	Expenditure item	Value of losses/ lost revenue (lei)
1	Meals for children in 2024	913,703
2	Purchase of coal and wood without supporting documents (Children's Creative Center in Lipcani).	37,403
3	Repair and installation work on electrical networks not carried out	130,260
4	Lack of fixed assets and property, discovered after stock-taking at Medveja Middle School	55,219
5	Transfers for meals to CC "Universal CO-OP Briceni," not confirmed by documents	664,811
6	Transfers that do not match Treasury records	578,835
In total		Approx. 2,380,000

Based on the conclusions of the audit team, the district administration took steps to contact the following authorities: the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Education and Research, the Edineț Prosecutor's Office, Briceni Office, the National Anti-Corruption Center, and the Briceni Police Inspectorate. According to Dorin Pavaloi, these institutions did not respond with the expected level of involvement. "Everything we pointed out a year ago is now coming true. I am very sorry that our authorities did not react in time to stop it all, because millions more have been stolen during this period," Pavaloi said.

The district administration claims that it sent a copy of the audit results commissioned by the District Council to **Vitalie Știrbu**, then acting head of Briceni Education, Youth, and Sports Directorate, on 8 November 2024. When asked by NordNews, however, Știrbu categorically rejected any accusations and denied any involvement in embezzlement: "I can't tell you anything because even though I requested an audit, I haven't seen the document yet. However, as far as I know, I am 100% certain that I am not involved. They used

my electronic signature without my knowledge. All the documents I signed were based on the working group's decisions. The Ministry of Education did not dismiss me for this reason. I was appointed interim head in February 2024. A year later, I informed the minister that the District Council had refused to organize a recruitment competition. For this reason, it would be best for me to leave and wait for the competition to be announced so I can submit my application." When asked who could have used his electronic signature, Știrbu gave a short answer: "Most likely the accountant."

However, Minister of Education **Dan Perciun** stated that the decision regarding Vitalie Știrbu was made following an audit. "We conducted our own audit to verify the information presented. The information was confirmed, so we canceled the decree appointing the interim head and forwarded all the materials to law enforcement."

In response to a request from NordNews in June, Ministry of Education representatives stated that the institution had asked the State Financial Control Inspectorate to conduct a thematic audit of Briceni District Education, Youth, and Sports Directorate. The inspections covered the period from 1 January 2023, to 30 September 2024. The results were unexpectedly favorable: the inspectors stated that no significant violations were detected and that the major repairs mentioned in previous reports were completed.

However, the situation soon took a different turn. In February 2025, the Ministry of Education and Research's Internal Audit Service initiated an unannounced field inspection. On 19 February, the auditors visited three education institutions: Grigore Vieru High School in Briceni and the Theoretical High Schools in Corjeuți and Grimăncăuți. Their findings were the opposite of those of the inspectors: some of the repair work had not actually been carried out.

As early as August, a repeat audit by the State Financial Control Inspectorate revealed the embezzlement of **6.6 million lei** in public funds. The case was referred to the Edineț Prosecutor's Office.

HOW SCHOOLS WERE REPAIRED ONLY ON PAPER

With approximately 700 students, **Grigore Vieru** High School is the largest in the Briceni district. According to the invoices,

protective equipment was installed in the boiler room at a cost of 30,000 lei. “I did not sign such documents because they did not reflect reality. I thought there had been a mix-up with documents from other institutions, so I returned them. Now, I am still explaining certain points of which I was unaware because I did not have direct access to the accounting software. Therefore, I could not independently verify all financial transactions. I was shocked when I found out about the audit results,” said **Aliona Caduc**, the institution’s director.

The Grigore Vieru High School had ‘installation work’ done in the boiler room, which cost over 30,000 lei. The Middle School in the village of Halahora had an electrical panel ‘installed’, which cost 4,400 lei. The high schools in Grimăncăuți and Corjeuți had electrical networks ‘repaired’, which cost 10,500 and nearly 16,000 lei, respectively. In all cases, the same scheme of non-existent work was used. Apart from Aliona Caduc, the directors of the aforementioned schools refused to comment on the matter. However, during the audit commissioned by the District Council, they signed a declaration stating that they were seeing the handover documents for the first time, that they had never signed them, and that the work indicated had not actually been carried out in their institutions.

FOOD WITH A TASTE OF CORRUPTION

The situation was no clearer when it came to food. According to tender.gov.md, a platform that displays public procurement contracts, CC “Universalcoop” from Briceni won most procurement tenders for food supply in education institutions in the Briceni district between 2022 and 2024. The company was awarded 11 contracts, totaling 5.6 million lei. The company was designated the winner in all 11 cases, with the total value of the awarded contracts amounting to 5.6 million lei.

The Ministry of Education and Research conducted an audit of contract no. 5, which was for the purchase of food products for institutions under the jurisdiction of the Briceni District Directorate of Education, Youth, and Sports. The contract was dated 3 January 2024. The contract value was found to have increased by about

218,300 lei compared to the company's submitted bid. **Vitalie Știrbu**, the head of the Briceni Education Directorate, signed the contract electronically.

When asked to comment, company administrator **Valeriu Urechean** said the company had always operated transparently. "Since 1986, we have provided services to all the district's schools, kindergartens, and businesses. We supply them with goods. All the tenders we have participated in have gone through Chișinău, everywhere in Moldova. We offer reasonable prices, which is why we sometimes win. We have everything documented, and all invoices have been correctly completed electronically. The financial control institutions checked all signatures and goods received. An audit was carried out that lasted 22 days. Two inspectors examined us here and studied all the documents. In the end, everything was found to be in order and no violations were identified. The Education Directorate owes us 425,000 lei, and they are going to pay us. I took them to court," Valeriu Urechean said.

According to the Ministry of Education, the audit team believes that this difference represents a significant deviation that poses serious risks to the public procurement process and undermines the principles of transparency, legality, and the efficient use of public funds.

SECRETS OF ACCOUNTING RECORDS WITHIN THE EDUCATION DIRECTORATE

During the Ministry of Education and Research's audit, the Education, Youth, and Sports Directorate were asked to provide extracts regarding its financial operations in 2024. This revealed several suspicious transfers:

- 49,900 lei paid to Global Tur SRL, which, according to public sources, is a travel agency.
- "An auditor arrived from Chișinău in May, checked everything, and took all the documents back. The money was intended for a children's trip to Chișinău. Apparently, there were two buses and a minivan," a representative of the agency told us.
- 99.890 lei to the non-bank lending company, Credit Auto SRL.

We contacted the company's representatives for more information, but after a few initial calls explaining why we were contacting them, they stopped answering the phone.

- 528,450 lei to Grandcardinal SRL, founded by Aurelia Pșenicinîi, former chief accountant of Briceni Education Directorate. Aurelia Pșenicinîi was also dismissed from her position in August by a decree of the Minister of Education. We were unable to locate her to request a comment. Her home is sealed and her phone is disconnected.

Grandcardinal SRL was registered in Briceni in 2018. Aurelia Pșenicinîi is the sole founder and administrator of the company, holding a 100% stake. According to the OpenMoney portal, the company's areas of expertise include wholesale trade in wood and construction materials, construction of residential and non-residential buildings, business and management consulting, and retail trade in furniture.

The auditors said they didn't have evidence to confirm the legality of these transactions. They asked the accountant to present supporting documents at the time of the audit. She reportedly replied that the documents relating to Credit Auto SRL and Grandcardinal SRL were missing due to an 'error'. The day after the auditors made their request, the amounts transferred to the two companies were returned to the Directorate.

We tried to speak with **Rodica Cojocaru**, the interim head of the Briceni Education Directorate, but she did not respond to our calls.

HOW DID THINGS GET TO THIS POINT?

Since 2013, Moldova has operated a financing formula for education institutions. The basic principle is simple: money follows the student. A set amount is allocated for each student, so the more students a school has, the more funding the institution receives. The school can manage its budget according to its own needs. In the Briceni district, 'centralized accounting' was applied to all education institutions for many years. Although several schools wanted to switch to self-management, they did not manage to do so until 2025.

"We made numerous requests to the District Council for the

school to adopt financial self-management because we could make savings. This was possible thanks to the increase in the number of students. With its own budget, the institution and the administrative council could decide how to allocate the funds and set priorities. We have been trying to achieve this for many years. We have made requests and presented arguments. However, as the council secretaries explained to us in 2014, 2016, and 2018, “schools will not be able to manage their budgets effectively,” said Aliona Caduc, director of Grigore Vieru High School.

Currently, about 20 of the district’s 30 schools are self-financing. These schools manage their funds independently and select the winning companies in procurement tenders themselves.

CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS FOR ACTS DISCOVERED BY AUDITORS

Based on the auditors’ findings, two criminal cases were initiated: the first on 30 December 2024, following a thematic financial inspection that verified the Directorate’s activity between January 2023 and September 2024. The inspectors found evidence of embezzlement and misappropriation by individuals in positions of authority, which is a crime under Article 192(2) of the Criminal Code. The second was filed on 6 March 2025, in response to the district president’s request and the results of the independent audit. This time, it was based on Article 192(5) of the Criminal Code for causing particularly large-scale damage.

The Edineț Prosecutor’s Office informed us that the two cases were merged on 14 October 2025. **Vitalie Știrbu** and **Aurelia Pșenicinîi** are now suspects. According to the response provided to NordNews by the Edineț Prosecutor’s Office, “currently, criminal proceedings are underway to identify all persons involved in committing this crime, clarify the circumstances of its commission, and take the necessary measures provided for by law.”

HOW PROJECT WORTH OVER 13 MILLION LEI FAILED, LEAVING TWO VILLAGES IN REZINA TO DRY UP FROM THIRST

ANDREI BORDIAN,
REZINAINOBIECTIV.MD, 25 November 2025

The residents of Pripiceni-Răzeși, a village in the Rezina district, are facing an acute problem: a lack of drinking water exacerbated by climate change in recent years. Pripiceni-Răzeși and Pripiceni-Curchi are the only two villages in the district without running water, and the situation has become critical. Ten years ago, 11.7 million lei were allocated from the National Ecological Fund, and a 13.4 million lei contract was signed for the construction of a water supply and sewerage network for the two villages. However, all that has been done is the burial of 11 km of pipes, which remain empty to this day. Only around three million lei of the allocated funds were used. Construction halted at the second of four stages, and it was not until 2025 that the authorities began drafting a new technical project. There was no guarantee that the millions needed to continue the work would be available.



FROM THE HISTORY OF THE ISSUE

After the 2011 local elections, **Iacob Frunză** was elected mayor of the Pripiceni-Răzeși commune for the first time. At that time, the commune's most pressing problem was its lack of access to drinking water. The new mayor promised to solve this problem. In early 2013, the municipality received approval from the Rezina Environmental Inspectorate to allocate land for the construction of a drinking water supply pipeline, two drinking water collection facilities, a sewerage network, two pumping stations, and a wastewater treatment plant.

In fact, during the Soviet era, an aqueduct was built in Pripiceni-Răzeși to supply cattle and sheep farms, as well as a tobacco drying complex. A small number of residents were also connected to the aqueduct. The mayor says the water was collected from springs. Specifically, water was pumped from a 60-cubic-meter basin into a larger one. This second basin still exists today, but it has been divided into two parts to allow for drilling, disinfection, and other necessary operations. However, it is now almost dry.

"Then, we brought in experts from Chișinău who took water samples and checked the water flow to ensure it was sufficient. If there

wasn't enough water for the population, a letter from the mayor's office assured us that an additional artesian well would be built and connected to the water supply network. From 2013 to 2016, livestock farms basically disappeared. According to the data collected at the time, there was enough water in the catchment area," Mayor Iacob Frunză explains.

The Rezina District Council also helped solve the problem by allocating 95,500 lei on 29 May 2013, for designing water supply and sewerage systems. Then, on 24 April 2014, the District Council contributed an additional 30,000 lei for expert services and project verification.

After gathering all the documents, the project, "Drinking Water Supply and Sewerage in the Villages of Pripiceni-Răzeși and Pripiceni-Curchi," was submitted to the National Ecological Fund (FEN) for funding. The FEN is part of the Ministry of the Environment. Similar projects were funded by FEN in most districts of the Republic of Moldova. "Back then, it wasn't done through a competition. Once the project was finished, it was submitted and the applicant waited in line for funding," the mayor says.

The Rezina District Council guaranteed a 10% contribution to the project cost, and the Mayor's Office was to contribute the remaining 5%. The project is on the 2015 list of those approved for financing from the National Ecological Fund, along with 347 other localities in the country.

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT AND LEGAL PROCEEDINGS DELAYED THE START OF WORK

The deadline for submitting bids was 10 February 2016. On 2 May 2016, the final stage of the public procurement competition took place, with eight companies participating. Alexdan SRL was ultimately selected as the winner, and the Pripiceni-Răzeși Mayor's Office signed a contract with them worth 13.4 million lei four days later.

On 1 June 2016, Ecotop Proiect SRL, a company that participated in the bidding process, submitted a request to the Rezina District Court to invalidate the results of the bid and halt the execution of the public procurement contract until the dispute was resolved.

Just nine days later, on 10 June 2016, the Rezina District Court

issued a ruling that granted Ecotop Proiect SRL's request and suspended the execution of the public procurement contract. The mayor's office appealed the first instance court decision, requesting its reversal and a new decision denying the request for precautionary measures.

On 11 August 2016, the Chişinău Court of Appeals overturned the Rezina District Court's ruling of 10 June 2016 and dismissed the claim filed by Ecotop Proiect SRL as unfounded. The decision was final. Consequently, the decision designating "Alexdan" SRL as the winner remained in force, as did the contract with the mayor's office.

According to Mayor **Iacob Frunză**, work started later than planned due to the court proceedings. "They were supposed to start in the spring, but because of the court proceedings, they didn't start until after they won the case in the fall."

THE PROJECT STOPPED AT THE SECOND STAGE

The project was divided into four stages. Once completed, the villagers would no longer have to carry water from far away. Accordingly, the funds allocated for the project would be transferred as each stage was completed.

Stage I: On 12 November 2015, a two-million-lei contract was signed that was valid until 31 December 2017. The funds were fully utilized six months before the deadline. Accordingly, in April 2017, the acceptance committee signed the minutes upon completion of the two million lei project, which was performed by Alexdan SRL in a high-quality manner and in accordance with the specifications. The contractor received the funds in three installments. "The work was carried out on time and to a high standard, in accordance with the project," Mayor Iacob Frunză wrote in the mayor's office narrative report. He signed the document as the person responsible for the project. By this point, 11 kilometers of pipes had been laid.

Stage II: At the meeting of the Board of Directors of the National Ecological Fund on 2 June 2016, an additional sum of two million lei was approved for the second stage of the project. The

contract was signed on 13 June 2016, and was initially valid until 1 June 2017. The deadline was first extended by an additional agreement until 31 December 2017, and then extended again by another agreement until 31 December 2018. However, despite the extensions, only half of the two million lei allocated was spent in three installments, with the last payment made on 6 July 2018. However, even though the deadline was extended twice, only half of the two million lei allocated at this stage – 976,746 lei – was spent in three installments. The last payment was made on 6 July 2018.

Stage III: Although the previous contract was still in effect and had been extended, a new contract was signed on 23 September 2016, for the third stage. This new contract was worth an additional 2 million lei and was valid until 31 December 2018. Funds provided under this contract were not used except for an advance payment of 200,000 lei granted on 10 November 2016.

Stage IV: The contract for the final stage was signed on 4 April 2019. It was worth 5,797,556 lei and was valid until 22 March 2022. This money was not used either.

THE WORK WAS ABANDONED

Thus, only 3,176,746 lei of the 13.4 million lei stipulated in the contract were actually used. Currently, there is no answer as to why the work was abandoned despite the availability of funds from FEN.

In April 2025, when contacted, **Mihail Cebotarenco**, the administrator of Alexdan—the company that was supposed to carry out all the work in all four stages—denied any involvement. He stated that he had ‘never heard of such a municipality’ and then ended the conversation.

In November 2025, we attempted to contact the company’s management again, but the official email address listed on several documents was inactive, and the landline numbers were out of service. We finally received the following response on Viber: “We are sorry. The company’s administrator (*Mihail Cebotarenco* – editor’s note) has

passed away.” According to open databases, Cebotarenco was the company’s sole founder.

According to the Public Procurement Agency’s website, Alexdan SRL was awarded contracts with the state worth a total of over 26 million lei between 2012 and 2019. Since 2019, however, the company no longer appears on the list of public procurement tender winners.

“Contract No. 1, signed on 6 May 2016, was with Alexdan SRL for 13.4 million lei. This indicates that the funds approved from the Fund were sufficient for completing the work and commissioning the facility. According to the documents on file, the project has not been completed. Stages three and four have not even begun, and the minutes documenting the completion of the work have not been submitted,” the National Office for the Implementation of Environmental Projects within the Ministry of the Environment informed us.

“The first project was financed by the Rezina District Council, but the money was lost due to the company’s actions, which acted in bad faith. The mayor’s office has limited ability to respond to the array of problems,” says **Teodor Cuculescu**, president of the Rezina district.

Between 2012 and 2020, in addition to the Pripiceni-Răzeși project, FEN funded 19 other water supply and sewerage projects in the Rezina district. All of the projects were successfully completed, and now people have water. All of the mayors of these municipalities were members of the Democratic Party of Moldova (PDM), which was the ruling party until 2019. The mayor of Pripiceni-Răzeși was also a PDM member, but the project did not fare as well in his municipality. “For example, the company that did the work in the neighboring village paid for it out of pocket. After a certain period of time, the National Ecological Fund reimbursed the company. In our case, however, the company did not want to do that. Instead, it drew up reports on the completion of the work. The accountant and I took them, kept track of them, and submitted them to the Ministry. Then, they gave us the money. As soon as the money came in, they got to work. When there was no money, they didn’t work. That’s how it went until the contract expired and we lost funding from the Ministry of the Environment,” said Mayor Iacob Frunză when asked why the work was completed in other villages but stopped in Pripiceni-Răzeși.

A NEW TECHNICAL PROJECT IS EXPECTED TO RESUME CONSTRUCTION OF THE AQUEDUCT

In February 2025, the Rezina District Council allocated 250,000 lei to the Pripiceni-Răzeși Mayor's Office to develop a technical project. The project includes the construction of an artesian well, which is a mandatory condition for new public procurement of such works. The fountain will replace the dried-up water catchment. The project also includes the completion of work on the water supply.

The project is still in development, so it is unclear how much funding will be needed to complete the work and provide people with running water. Local authorities hope to receive assistance from the state and external donors: "To participate in the National Program 'European Village,' you must have a project. What can the mayor do in this situation? The only option is to carry out the project, despite the risk that it will become invalid over time. When the transition was made from the old standards to the new ones, projects that moved from one system to another were affected. Now, however, the technical project is valid for a long time. It's just a matter of updating the cost estimates resulting from the project. Prices can change, after all. With the technical design in place, the estimate can be updated quickly and inexpensively," says **Teodor Cuculescu**, president of the Rezina.

"We hope that the 'European Village' will continue. I discussed the issue with the president and the prime minister. I told them that I don't need money for roads right now. I will build the road, but then I will have to break it again to carry out waterworks. I hope to solve the problem within the next two years," concluded Mayor Iacob Frunză.

HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF LEI OF LEI SPENT ANNUALLY ON ILLEGAL DISMISSAL OF EMPLOYEES. THE ANSA CASE

LUMINIȚA CAULIUC,
ZIARUL DE GĂRDĂ, 27 November 2025

Over the past three years, the National Agency for Food Safety (ANSA) has spent over 788,700 lei on salaries paid during the forced absence from work of employees it had dismissed, but whom the court reinstated. In most cases like this, employees win, not employers, according to labour law experts. They also claim that employers do not strictly comply with the law when dismissing employees, resulting in huge amounts of public money being spent to pay two people's salaries for the same job.



“HOW CAN YOU STILL BELIEVE THEM? WHOM TO BELIEVE?”

In 2025, ANSA lost its first-instance lawsuit against **Sergiu Ioniță** after the Chișinău District Court’s Râșcani Division overturned the order to dismiss him in April 2024.

Ioniță was dismissed after the National Integrity Authority (ANI) found him guilty of violating the legal regime governing conflicts of interest in a statement of findings of 13 February 2024. This happened although the statement of findings mentioned, “the integrity inspector will not request termination of the mandate or employment relationship,” as this was Ioniță’s first infringement of this kind.

Therefore, the judges at Chișinău District Court, Râșcani Division, ruled that the statement of findings had not been properly notified, and ‘had not obtained the force of law in accordance with the requirements of the Administrative Code’. Thus, it was not final. According to the court, ANSA ‘had no right’ to dismiss Sergiu Ioniță from his position. He was also fined for his actions. The court further noted that the dismissal from office violated the principle of inadmissibility of double punishment for the same offense.

Therefore, on 17 April 2025, ANSA was required to reinstate Sergiu Ioniță to an equivalent position and pay him his salary for the period he was forced to be absent from work. When contacted by *Ziarul de Gardă*, Ioniță said the amount in question was 300,000 lei. However, ANSA appealed the first instance court's decision.

After the court ruling, ANSA offered Sergiu Ioniță the position of head of control post at the Sculeni-Sculeni border. The post is located 300 kilometers away from his home, but he accepted the offer. "How can you still believe them? Whom to believe? This is exactly how the court ruled: 'Reinstatement'. But in order not to reinstate me in my previous position, they sent me 300 kilometers away from the city where I worked before." Sergiu Ioniță says.

"AS IF IT HAD BEEN ORDERED"

Ziarul de Gardă recently uncovered another case involving **Natalia Iacub-Tocan**. She was dismissed from her position as chief inspector at ANSA for "failure to comply with the work schedule, including repeated absences, tardiness, and leaving work early." Ms. Iacub-Tocan claims her absences were due to her university studies.

The evidence attached and the statements of the parties in the case revealed that prior to leaving to study, the claimant informed her superior — the Acting Head of the ANSA Inspection Department at the Tudora-Starokazacie border — of her need to attend university courses. He agreed to adjust her work schedule, stipulating that the unworked hours be made up later. According to the timesheet, she has fulfilled her monthly work quota.

According to the court ruling, statements made during the disciplinary investigation revealed that Natalia Iacub-Tocan's supervisor covered her shifts, ensuring that the work of the inspection unit remained unaffected by her absence. No operational deficiencies were recorded.

The judges of the Chișinău District Court, Center Division, noted that "the disciplinary committee was obligated to objectively analyze these circumstances and verify whether the claimant had fulfilled her work obligations by covering all her shifts, which

would have revealed that she did not have any unjustified absences from work.”

In November 2024, therefore, the court upheld the lawsuit and obliged ANSA to reinstate Natalia Iacub-Tocan in her previous position as senior inspector and to pay her salary for the 11 months she was forced to be absent from work. According to her 2023 declaration of assets and personal interests, the employee had a monthly salary of over 18,000 lei at the time of her dismissal. Thus, ANSA would have to pay her over 207,000 lei from public funds for an estimated 11 months of forced absence from work.

In June 2025, the Center Court of Appeals upheld the first instance court’s decision. The case is now before the Supreme Court of Justice (CSJ).

Following the first instance court’s ruling, Natalia Iacub-Tocan was reinstated in her previous position and paid one month’s salary. She claims that she was dismissed because she was troublesome. “You know how it is here. They didn’t like my response. I told them too many things to their faces—that they were breaking the law—and they decided to let me go. (...) I wasn’t the kind of person they liked. (...) The judge was confused when he saw my file, and the lawyer asked why I was being released. It was as if it had been ordered,” Natalia Iacub-Tocan says.

ANSA’S EXPLANATIONS

Over the past three years, ANSA has dismissed three employees who were later reinstated by the court, which also ruled that ANSA pay their salaries for the period of their absence. In response to *Ziarul de Gardă*, ANSA stated that the dismissals were carried out “as part of the process of reforming certain subdivisions and sanitary-veterinary services provided by ANSA, with the aim of holding accountable employees “who violated professional integrity and the zero-tolerance policy for corruption.” ANSA paid the three employees a total of 740,644 lei for forced absence from work and an additional 23,123 lei for moral damages.

At the same time, ANSA informed us that it imposed disciplinary sanctions on a fourth employee in the form of dismissal

from public office ‘for violations committed while performing his work duties’. However, the dismissal order was challenged in court through an administrative case lawsuit. As a result, the order was annulled and ANSA paid the employee 48,094 lei, plus an additional 5,000 lei as moral damages.

Thus, over the last three years, ANSA has paid a total of over 788,700 lei in salaries for forced absence from work and 28,100 lei as moral damages. **Larisa Punga**, the head of ANSA’s finance and accounting department, explained that this money was paid from the institution’s savings.

In its response to *Ziarul de Gardă*, ANSA claims that it lost the lawsuits due to ‘delays in the court’s review of administrative disputes’.

“The Agency submitted the administrative proceedings and related evidence to the court within the time limits stipulated by the court decisions, and it did not request a postponement of the scheduled hearings. In some cases, however, the plaintiffs requested a postponement of the review of administrative litigation cases for various reasons, such as the absence of a defense attorney or illness. Thus, the above-mentioned amount cannot be attributed solely to the Agency, since the speed of administrative litigation proceedings depends on the behavior of those involved (plaintiff, plaintiff’s representative, defendant, third parties, etc.),” states the response to the information request sent to *Ziarul de Gardă*.

EXPERT: “REINSTATEMENT IS EXPENSIVE, AND IT COSTS A LOT”

According to **Felicia Păscăluță**, a Doctor of Law, university lecturer, and labour law expert, most disputes arise because employers do not correctly apply the procedure for terminating an employment contract through dismissal.

“Dismissal is a disciplinary sanction in itself, and the most drastic one. According to Article 206 of the Labour Code, there are **four** types of disciplinary sanctions: warning, reprimand, severe reprimand, and dismissal. (...) When dismissal is applied, the individual employment contract is terminated. Article 86 clearly

outlines the grounds for dismissal. There is a mandatory procedure that employers must follow for each ground in order to dismiss an employee correctly. The biggest problem is that employers do not follow the correct procedure for each ground for dismissal,” the expert explains.

According to her, there are several reasons why the procedure is not carried out correctly. “Some employers are confident that their employees won’t go to court. Other employers do not have human resources because, as you can imagine, they don’t deal with this directly, but have lawyers or a human resources department.”

In some cases, abuse of power by employers can also be grounds for unlawful dismissal. “This can be abuse based on gender, age, religion, political views, and so on. The spectrum is very broad,” Felicia Păscăluță says. According to her, the court usually rules in favor of the employee. “Thus, reinstatement is expensive, and it costs a lot,” the expert concludes.

“A labour dispute is supposed to be resolved within three months, but it takes a year or two. Neither the employee nor the employer is to blame. The courts have many cases and may review one once a month or every two months, which is why the process takes so long,” Felicia Păscăluță explains. According to the expert, the longer a case takes to review, the longer the forced absence from work. Ultimately, the former employee is paid for this absence.

Felicia Păscăluță believes that many illegal dismissals could be avoided if institutions had specialized human resources staff. “It’s not that simple. There needs to be a legal culture. The law needs to be applied correctly—not ‘how I want it’, ‘how he wants it’, or ‘I do what I want’, or anything like that.”

LAWYER: “ULTIMATELY, THIS HARMS THE STATE”

Labour law specialist **Dorel Rotaru** talks about abuses of power: “In my opinion, very serious abuses are being committed. (...) The money was collected on the basis of a court ruling. Once reinstatement has been ordered, it is normal to order payment of salaries for the period of forced absence. There is no other solution

here. Ultimately, this harms the state,” the lawyer explains. He believes the problem persists because ‘no one wants to put an end to this abuse’. “They are either afraid or unaware of the problem, but as long as the abuse exists, it encourages public authorities to continue abusing rights,” he says.

FORMER LABOUR INSPECTORS, REINSTATED IN THEIR POSITIONS BY COURT DECISIONS, BUT ONLY ON PAPER?

Ziarul de Gardă previously wrote about several former labour inspectors who were dismissed after the State Labour Inspectorate underwent a reorganization. However, they were reinstated in their positions by court decisions.

Then, *Ziarul de Gardă* identified 11 rulings on the court portal that required the State Labour Inspectorate to reinstate the dismissed inspectors and pay them their salaries for the period during which they were absent from work.

It is estimated that the Inspectorate would have to pay approximately 120,000 lei for each labour inspector for at least one year of forced absence from work. Additionally, inspectors receive compensation equivalent to six months’ average salary upon dismissal. However, when we contacted one of the inspectors mentioned in the *Ziarul de Gardă* article in November 2025, he said that he and two other former colleagues had not received their money. Moreover, shortly afterwards, they were laid off again due to staff reductions. He claims that he was offered other positions in exchange, but they were located in Bălți or Cahul, too far from home.

In an attempt to find out how many court decisions had been enforced, we contacted **Roman Talmaci**, the president of the Union of Bailiffs, and called the Center Court of Appeals and the Chișinău District Court. Ultimately, we discovered that data on the enforcement of such decisions was only available from each employing institution.

BLACK BOOK

OF PUBLIC MONEY WASTE

IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

2025



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2025

BLACK BOOK OF PUBLIC MONEY WASTE IN THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA