

The Electronic Public Procurement System, open data and story telling in Romania¹

Romanian Academic Society

An instrument that should have ensured transparency in public procurement procedures is the Electronic Public Procurement System (SEAP). In reality, SEAP is difficult to use effectively, at least for those who want to have an overview of public procurement. After months of navigation on its website (www.e-licitatie.ro), we are left with the impression that SEAP was designed to check a requirement, while its functionality is far from an ideal one.

Using SEAP becomes impractical when investigating broader sectors. SEAP interface provides search functions based only on one specific CPV code². In addition, SEAP doesn't allow adding numbers. At every step, be it search, switching to the next page of the search results, or viewing whatever notice, a new CAPTCHA code is required to be filled in. SEAP allows only viewing each notice separately while compilation of statistics, comparisons or rankings depending on contracts value are Science Fiction.

Other sites built with European funds and dedicated to projects who received European funding are no better. Project details on the website of the Ministry of European Funds (<http://www.fonduri-ue.ro/proiect>) or on the website of the Ministry of Regional Development and Public Administration (<http://administratie.gisportal.ro/mdrap/>) have succeeded in not giving out any information about public procurement contract winners.

In an attempt to gain systematic access to SEAP data, neither the National Authority for the Regulation and Monitoring of Public Procurement (ANRMAP), nor the Agency for Digital Agenda could provide assistance. Answers to any questions regarding data, values, and statistical figures came with delay because public authorities had to communicate first with UTI, the private company that created SEAP. UTI is the only one that knows how to solve system problems and the only one with access to the SEAP – database behind the online interface.

The Romanian Academic Society (RAS) paid monthly subscription for SEAP web services through which we could access the information contained in all notices. RAS hired a programmer to perform data mining. Unfortunately, the technical problems that came up during the process of data mining were solved very slowly, precisely because the solutions came from UTI. It was clear that the company doesn't have a dedicated team to deal with this service, and in the summer of 2014 we were the only customers who used that precise service.

¹ This concept note is based on a subchapter prepared by Mădălina Doroftei for the RAS Annual Forecast and Analysis Report 2015 and ANTICORRP Work Package 8 Deliverable

² Common Procurement Vocabulary Code

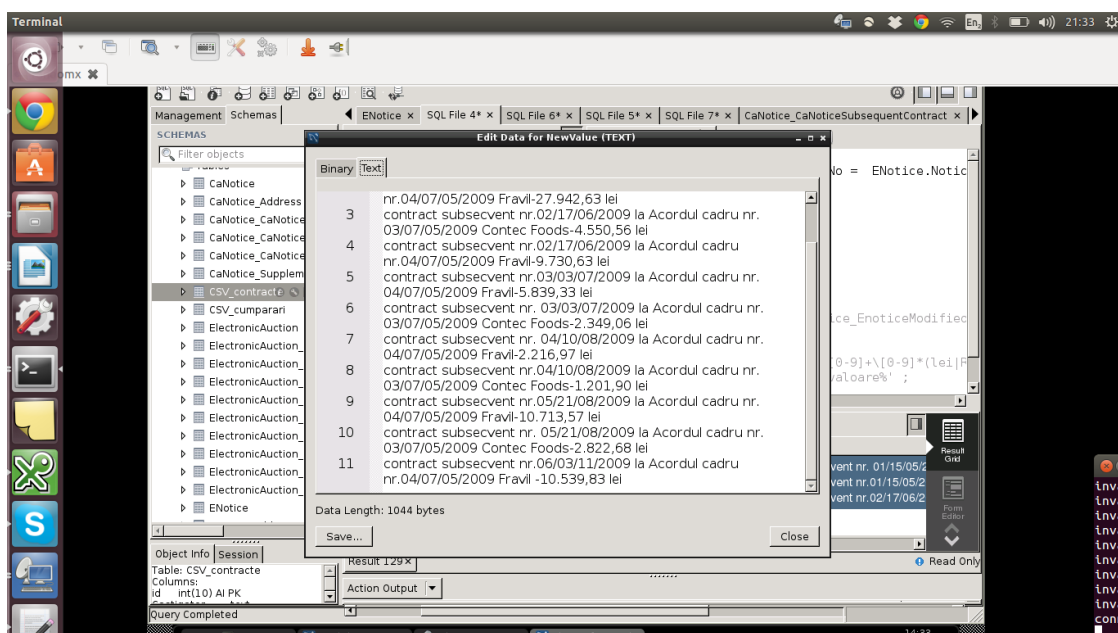
Service errors could not be all handled automatically, meaning the data collection script had to be carefully human-supervised. Next, the duration of extracting information was very long, since the service was limited by default to 10 records per customer query. That means when trying to collect notices, we couldn't extract more than 10 files per each contact with SEAP server.

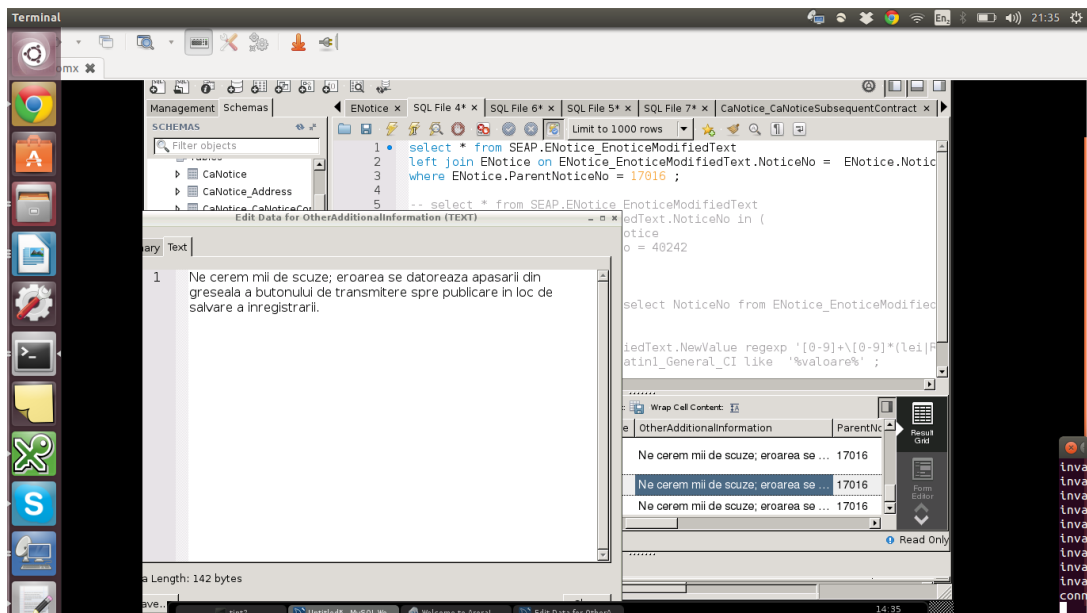
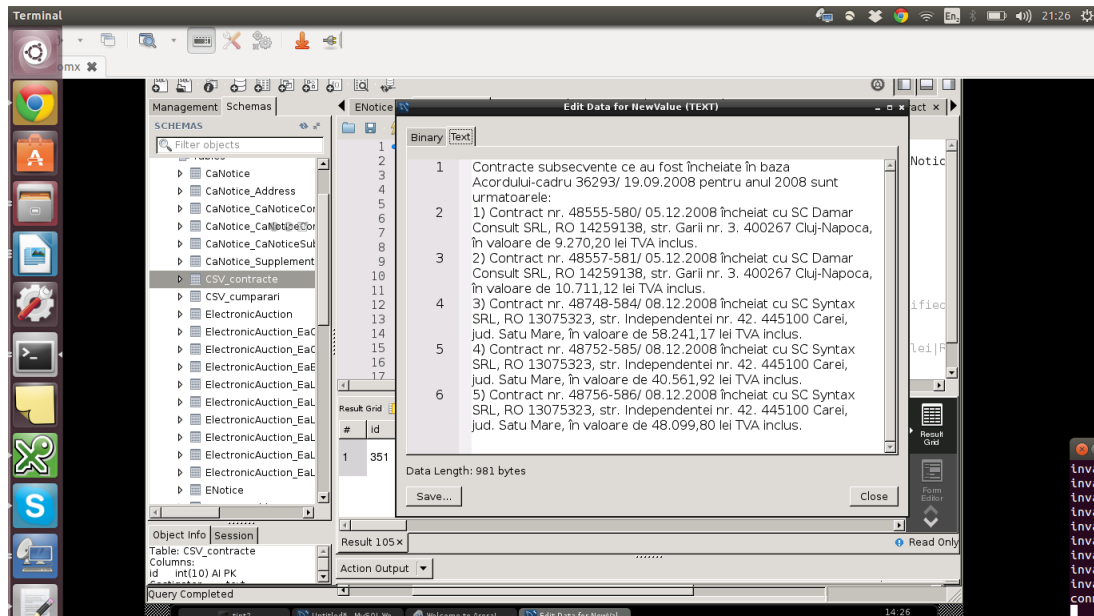
In some cases, verifying data completeness has been difficult because we have no access to functions that could check the total number of database records. We compared number of records with the number of notices from the site <http://www.e-licitatie.ro> (official SEAP website). Still, errata notices can be counted only manually on the online website (we're talking tens of thousands of errata), as one award notice, for example, can have several errata modifying its content.

Once collected, the challenge is to assemble all files into a consistent database. SEAP notices of different categories contain information differently organized (same chapter has various names or positions in different category notices). In other words, the mined files have diverse structure depending on the type of notice. Moreover, there may or may not be filled in additional fields in the same category of notices.

In terms of errata to SEAP notices, they may have different structures from a record to another. This makes processing hard – it requires a considerable number of additional steps to detect all possible cases and act accordingly. Within errata content, the filled in text information does not comply with any standardization, punctuation or formatting. Thus, applying specified errata corrections is one of the biggest challenges in data interpretation.

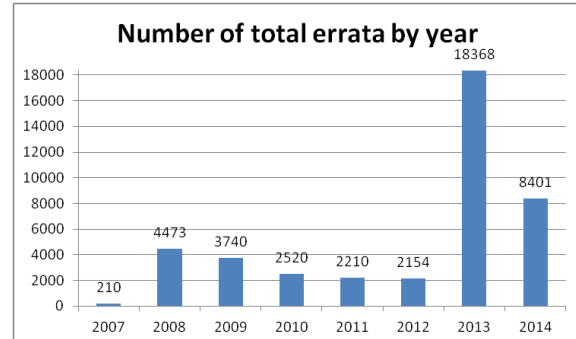
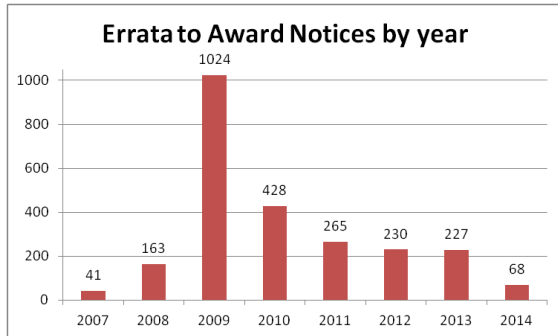
Various examples of errata extracted from our relational data base:





Perhaps even worse, errata notices contain a number of essential information that cannot be retrieved from any other SEAP section. Many users have published errata containing information on subsequent contracts (based on awarded framework agreements) – contract number, the contracting company’s name, contract value. We’re talking about 1243 modifications contained by 766 errata (out of 2446 errata linked to contract award notices), i.e. 31% of cases. It is yet not clear whether these choices were made knowingly, aiming at

effectively hiding contracts, or not. It may be that at the time, users didn't know any another way to adding subsequent contracts to a framework agreement.



Source: Own calculations

However, the Romanian Government created the online portal <http://data.gov.ro> under the European Open Data initiative – Digital Agenda for Europe. Its aim is to publish open data and provide access to information. The initiative is to be commended. Nevertheless, when accessing public datasets the question arises whether the case is for human error or malice.

First of all, the files are in CSV format, i.e. Comma Separated Values. This means that information from separate categories – values – should be in between quotes and separated by commas. The CSVs from data.gov.ro have the character "^" instead of "," as separator, while quotes are missing altogether. Then, information has not been exported by using a universal character set, but by using characters from different languages. Also, CSV files contain "broken" lines – the character "end of line" is found within the row. This means these lines have to be manually checked, and united if they belong to the same public procurement contract.

Both information collected from SEAP and those from CSV files provided by the Government contain obvious errors. Some errors are related to information that have not been rectified, such as the economic agent's country field, which may be empty or wrongly filled in with Albania, Afghanistan, Angola, etc. while the city of origin of the winning company is Buşteni, Tulcea and Bucharest (Romanian cities). Other issues regarding errors are related to absurdly low or high prices. Therefore we concluded that SEAP errata notices containing modifications of errors in different notices have not been applied to public procurement open data.

SEAP deficiencies were brought to the attention of public authorities on numerous occasions. The Agency for Digital Agenda launched a procurement procedure for a new system to replace SEAP, called SICAP, in 2014. Surprisingly, however, SICAP does not solve all the problems reported by users or civil society. The Foundation for an Open Society warned that the topic of open data is completely ignored and that there is no mention of requirements regarding an export module for data.gov.ro in the tender documentation. All this, although the Government intends through its Governance Programme 2013-2016 and Online Services and Design Department to implement the European initiative Open Data – Digital Agenda for Europe – and make "publicly available data accessible, reusable and freely shareable".

We are still working at cleaning public procurement information and configuring a user-friendly database by using different tools such as scripts and parsers. The data from date.gov.ro have not been properly exported from SEAP. Therefore, the new SICAP should assume an export module and incorporate standardized errata information in order to correctly export the data base. Still, the publication of this specific Public Sector Information is sensitive, as many corruption cases arise from public procurement contracts.

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