Sagrada Due Diligence

Will Spain's anti-corruption reforms work?

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Daniel: Corruption scandals have dominated the front pages in Spain this summer. How serious is the problem in 2025?

José María: I don't think it's a widespread problem. Although we've seen some very serious cases of political corruption this summer, they are isolated incidents even if they have left a substantial media impact. Essentially, these were trusted political representatives who abused their power by using public institutions to commit corruption in public procurement. But at the same time, I don't think corruption is a widespread phenomenon among politicians, private companies or public employees.

Ultimately, the prevention systems — in this case, police, investigative and oversight bodies were effective and the corruption was detected. But if you think of the enormous sums of money handled in public procurement in Spain each year, with countless contracts carried out by many different contracting authorities and companies, I don't believe corruption is particularly significant in quantitative terms.

Daniel: So corruption is no longer a systemic issue in Spain?

José María: I don't think it is a systemic problem, but rather the result of certain individuals in positions of political influence making improper use of public procurement. The majority of civil servants, police officers and members of the judiciary, act according to levels of honesty and integrity that are equivalent to those in other European countries.

Daniel: Is it possible to measure the problem?

José María: Corruption is not easy to measure. You can measure perception, which is what Transparency International does in its surveys. But perception is only that. It's true that the perception of corruption in Spain — as well as in Europe — is high.

If we were to measure and analyse everything published on Spain's public procurement platform — including all the awarded contracts and the companies that won them — using the artificial intelligence systems already employed by supervisory authorities such as the National Commission on Markets and Competition, the security forces, the consumer office, the National Police, the courts, external oversight bodies and the courts of auditors, then we might be able to measure the extent of corruption more easily. Based on all that data, I think the actual extent of corruption would be quite small, despite the public's heightened perception.

Daniel: Following the Cerdán scandal, the government published a series of anti-corruption reforms in July including setting up a new Public Integrity Agency. Are these proposals likely to make a difference?

José María: The government's proposed measures are mostly reactive rather than preventive, and some of them were already on the table. Two of the reforms — greater analysis of the procurement platform, through which all tenders are announced, and the use of artificial intelligence technologies and big data methods — are already in place. Irregularities have already been detected through these methods because much of it is already in place.

I don't think creating specialised courts is the best solution either as its tackling corruption after it has already happened. The criminal courts we already have are working well, as is all the investigative work carried out by the police.

In contrast, the idea for a new Public Integrity Agency is interesting. It could be useful, provided it is a fully independent authority, with a preventive role and equipped with sufficient technology, financial resources and long-term backing. But it should also have a remit to educate public sector workers and others on the principles of integrity and honesty.

But of course, the agency must be set up based on a broad bipartisan agreement which is hard to imagine at the moment. We need a national strategy on integrity in public management, and not just a unilateral government measure. I think all political forces need to come together to create a highly professionalised independent anti-corruption agency which would operate beyond political ideologies.

A public anti-corruption agency could also be a useful instrument for businesses. It would improve Spain's reputation as a country with high quality institutions and protections against corruption, thereby generating confidence among potential investors. However, it is clear that those involved must be independent, qualified and reputable. If ideological or political appointees are selected instead, the agency will not work, and could even be counterproductive.

Daniel: Have you seen an example from another country that could serve as a reference for Spain?

José María: I think Italy has done well. They created the Italian National Anti-corruption Authority with very strong powers, significant resources, and a staff selection process based on curriculum and expertise — all this in a country where combating the mafia is not easy. It's a model we should follow as it shows how to build a structure to reinforce integrity and prevent corruption.

Personally, I like the idea of promoting integrity because, as Kumar, the World Bank advisor, said: 'Corruption is not fought by fighting corruption; it is fought through prevention.' Clearly, any new agency should create preventive tools to minimise corruption cases as much as possible.
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Daniel: What is the likelihood of the bipartisan agreement at the moment in Spain?

José María: The political situation in Spain is well known both within and outside the country. There is currently no consensus among politicians on key issues such as this one. Even with the current government, I don't foresee the proposed measures being implemented in the short term. I think the required dialogue is currently missing.

A simpler reform that would be relatively easy to implement would be to make public procurement and public management more professional. There are too many processes in which politicians can influence decision-making, which is why cases such as those involving Koldo, Aldama, Cerdán and Ábalos have occurred. For example, France has a larger volume of public procurement than Spain, yet it has a much lower impact of corruption. Why? Because procurement professionals have a higher level of qualifications.

What I believe should not be done is the introduction of more bureaucracy. We already have a lot of defensive bureaucracy and we don't want to slow down administrative activity with even more bureaucracy.

Spain also needs to cultivate a culture of value rather than price. In my opinion, Spain would be making a mistake in the corruption debate by pushing everything towards auctions or lowest-price bidding, as this would deter private investment and could burden the country. In my view, the Spanish business sector is generally quite ethical in these corruption cases.

This is why I think corruption is more political than business-related. It is also important for Spain to recognise that many of our large companies and SMEs operate according to due diligence standards that are comparable with those in many European countries, as well as in the US and Japan.

If we create a system of distrust, we will likely discourage private investment and negatively affect our own business model. That's why it's important that any future reforms are properly thought through and don't cause any collateral damage to the wider economy.