

Transparency goes online: Azeri chapter of Transparency International launches Internet database to fight corruption

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BAKU, Azerbaijan - Transparency Azerbaijan and the Market Economy Development Assistance Foundation have initiated the creation of a new anti-corruption coalition. Called 'For Transparency', the new coalition will bring together non-governmental organizations, political parties and media to increase the transparency of governmental agencies and reduce the level of corruption in the country.

The presentation of the coalition to representatives of NGOs and the media was held on July 28 at the Enterprise Center in Baku's Old City.

Drafts of the statute and memorandum of the coalition have been distributed among foreign embassies, international organizations, NGOs and the media.

"We want the public to get acquainted with our initiative, and we are hoping for a reaction. The first comments were positive," said Rena Safaraliyeva, the executive director of Transparency Azerbaijan.

The founding meeting will be held in September. The 'For Transparency' coalition will not have the status of a legal entity.

The new anti-corruption movement will not take part in any kind of political activities, but it will lobby for the adoption of relevant legislation.

Its activity will include the organization of public events, conferences and roundtables to raise public awareness about corruption in the country and the mobilization of all sectors of Azeri society in a fight against corruption, Safaraliyeva told CBN.

Although Transparency Azerbaijan is the only organization in Azerbaijan that has as its central aim the fight against corruption, currently many NGOs touch on this subject within their programs for education, health care and a free media.

Transparency Azerbaijan was established in October 2000 by representatives of civil society and academia and fully accredited as a national chapter in October 2001. Transparency International is an international non-governmental organization, working worldwide as an anti-corruption movement.

According to Safaraliyeva, the problem of corruption is topical at all times. "When I was appointed to the position in 2000, everybody told me 'It is dangerous', but now that is not so, because the government has recognized the presence of this problem," she said. On the eve of Azerbaijan entering the Council of Europe in January 2001, the country undertook to draw up a state program for fighting corruption, adopting an anti-corruption law and joining international conventions.

According to the original schedule, all of the documents should already have come into effect. But while there has been progress towards legislation, the timetable has slipped.

"The anti-corruption bill was just approved by the Milli Majlis (Parliament) in its first reading in December of 2001. In regard to the state anti-corruption program, the public has no information so far," said Safaraliyeva. "Both documents must be drawn up with the participation of independent experts and non-governmental organizations."

Two months ago, Azerbaijan signed the international Civil Law and Criminal Law Conventions on Corruption, but they only go into effect after their ratification by the Milli Majlis. Although the government is implementing these obligations very slowly, Safaraliyeva said, people see that the authorities are acknowledging corruption as a problem and are taking steps to create a legal environment for an anti-corruption struggle.

"To eliminate the problem, it should first be recognized," she said. "I believe that this psychological barrier has been already broken with the assistance of international organizations," she said.

Safaraliyeva added that acknowledgment of the problem by government and support from international organizations had spurred on civil society and the media to anti-corruption activity. To promote the establishment of the anti-corruption coalition and increase awareness of the public about corruption and the measures to fight it, Transparency Azerbaijan has created a website (www.transparency-az.org).

It serves as an electronic database of materials on corruption, including legislation, results of surveys, ratings of corruption, as well as anti-corruption efforts, in Azerbaijan, Central, Eastern Europe and CIS countries in the Azeri, English and Russian languages.

Also Transparency Azerbaijan announced that it has set up a National Anti-Corruption Resource Center and Corruption On-line Research Information System (CORIS).

The resource center allows visitors to use its library, computer classes and free Internet access. The library offers materials on corruption, law, economy, human rights and political science. "We have collected over 500 documents, including media publications, analytical reports, results of sociological surveys and laws. Over 50 documents were translated into Azeri," Safaraliyeva said. "So far, the center has accepted over 230 visitors, mostly undergraduate and graduate students and professors from the State Economic University, the Academy of State Administration and Khazar University."

The resource center is a part of CORIS, a global project of Transparency International. CORIS, Safaraliyeva said, is a global internet network that allows visitors to put their publication, research and other analytical materials, as well as newspaper stories about corruption, on the Internet.

CORIS has 112 publications, touching on corruption in Azerbaijan in Azeri, English and Russian. Eighty-seven of them were submitted by Transparency Azerbaijan.

TA's projects have been created with financial support from the Eurasia Foundation, the European Commission and BP Azerbaijan.