

Armenians Doubt Anti-Graft Programme

Author: [Levon Dayan](#)

Many ordinary Armenians question whether new bid to combat corruption will stop bureaucrats lining their pockets.

As the government prepares to unveil a new anti-corruption programme next week, critics are asking why many high-up officials are still above the law.

The anti-graft programme is the work of a wide range of experts from both the government and international organisations. As well as officials from the ministries of justice, economy and finance and the presidential administration, specialists from the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the OSCE and Council of Europe took part in writing the draft

The World Bank allocated a grant of 300,000 US dollars for the project, which is due to be launched in September or October after a public consultation period. Bank spokesman Vigen Sarkisian said he expects there to be "broad discussion" of the plans published next week.

The first question being asked is how an anti-corruption drive can be enforced, when many of those in charge of it are suspected of being corrupt themselves.

By some estimates, around 95 per cent of Armenian businesses work in the shadow economy, with the result that around one trillion drams (two billion US dollars, a sum almost equivalent to the country's GDP) bypasses the state budget.

Parliament is one generator of corruption. Deputies have passed several laws containing loopholes that can be used for financial enrichment.

There were high hopes last year for a law passed last year that compelled government employees to declare all their earnings and possessions by January 31 this year.

Most declared their salaries, but kept silent about what their main sources of income were. For instance transport and communications minister Andranik Manukian, disclosed that he earned 5,000 US dollars a month (ten times more, incidentally than the president officially earns) did not mention that he also owns one of the most prestigious hotels in Yerevan and a car-sales company.

"I think bribes will always be taken, where ordinary citizens make direct contact with an official," said Sedmara Sedrakian, a pensioner. "Surely it should be possible to reduce the number of documents you need to receive a pension or an inheritance, so as to do less running around the bureaucrats' offices. I know many people, who are simply ready to bypass the law, so as not to be dependent on the appetite and mood of bureaucrats."

Transparency and openness are the first enemies of corruption, said Vaga Amirkhanian, head of the NGO Akastver, arguing that the Armenian media was in the frontline of combating corruption.

The daily newspaper Aravot regularly publishes photographs of hotels, restaurants and houses, which belong to ministers, heads of departments, parliamentary deputies, judges and their relatives. The

government has not reacted at all to this stream of publications. But it does have a strong effect on public perceptions.

Two recent surveys of business people, carried out by the NGO Armenian Democratic Forum with the assistance of the World Bank and by the IMF office in Yerevan, found high levels of frustration about corruption.

The respondents to the IMF survey of 95 businesses said that they were forced to give out most of their bribes to tax inspectors and customs officials. More than 70 per cent of those polled said that they were unprotected from arbitrary government interference. More than 80 per cent said that the court system was the institution that inspired least respect.

The head of the IMF office in Yerevan, Garbis Iradian, said that in a society where new institutions and laws were not yet functioning properly, the possibilities for corruption to flourish were growing and it was permeating the whole of society.

Not surprisingly, this has inspired enormous cynicism in society and the view that the corruption and the mafia are insurmountable - something the authors of the new document are keen to tackle.

"In ordinary conversation people give a mass of facts based on their personal experience, but because of all sorts of worries, they ask journalists not to quote them by name," said Ambassador Roy Reeve, head of the OSCE office in Yerevan and one of the initiators of the new anti-corruption programme. "And yet without these testimonies any publications listing facts can be (open to accusations of) slander."

Reeve said that they had hitherto worked closely with parliament and government on the anti-corruption document, but now wanted to involve a wider section of Armenian society. In September, a new public opinion survey will be published, carried out in Armenia by the NGO Transparency International.

"As soon as the strategy is adopted and open discussion of the document begins, journalists will be able to write in greater detail about negative phenomena occurring in this area," Reeve said.

The draft programme is aimed at tackling corruption at all levels of government. It envisages creating a new special organ to fight the problem.

But some experts and parliamentary deputies have already expressed fears that a special anti-graft agency could actually become an incubator of corruption, as its members could deliberately cover up evidence of fraud. Nothing less than an all-out assault seems likely to have any hope of rooting out this problem.

Levon Dayan is a freelance journalist based in Yerevan.

Location: [Armenia](#)

Source URL: <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/armenians-doubt-anti-graft-programme>