

ARMENIA SLIDES IN GLOBAL CORRUPTION RANKINGS

Posted on December 28, 2008 by Keghart



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By Asdghig Bedevian, Published in Armtown.com 23 September 2008

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Every year the Berlin-based Transparency International (TI) rates countries of the world on a 10-point scale, with zero indicating an extremely high degree of corruption as perceived by entrepreneurs and experts.

Armenia, along with Argentina, Moldova and four other states, ranked 109th out of 180 nations covered by Transparency International's 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI). It was assigned a score of 2.9, faring slightly worse than it did in the previous CPI released one year ago.

Armenia's score is based on seven corruption-related surveys conducted by other organizations, including the World Bank. It had already dropped by 0.1 point to 3.0 last year, dragging the country down to 99th place in TI's 2007 rankings.

By contrast, TI found a further significant drop in perceived corruption in neighboring Georgia, giving the latter 3.9 points and putting it in 67th place. Georgia was 79th in last year's CPI.

As always, the Armenian government and its supporters will draw comfort from the fact that all other non-Baltic former Soviet states were again judged to be more corrupt than Armenia. In particular, its arch-foe Azerbaijan regressed to 158th place in TI's latest rankings.

TI's Armenian affiliate, the Center for Regional Development (CRD), portrayed the survey as a further indication of the 'systemic' character of bribery and other corrupt practices that have long plagued the country. 'Unfortunately, there are very few areas unaffected by corruption,' the CRD chairwoman, Amalia Kostanian, told a news conference. 'If corruption is systemic, you can not eradicate it in one particular area.'

The administration of former President Robert Kocharian pledged to combat corruption throughout its decade-long rule that came to an end last spring. It launched in 2003 a Western-backed anti-corruption program consisting of mainly legislative measures. There is little evidence that they have reduced the scale of graft, however.

Kocharian's successor and longtime close associate, Serzh Sarkisian, admitted in July that the virtual absence of prosecutions of corrupt government officials has undermined public trust in the declared crackdowns on corruption. 'People must see that we are

not only talking but also acting,' Sarkisian said in a speech. 'If we talk about corruption all day long and don't show persons engaged in it, then our actions will not only produce zero results but will further aggravate the situation.'

His prime minister, Tigran Sarkisian, (no relation) has been even more vocal in acknowledging the seriousness of the problem. Sarkisian has described graft as the number one problem facing Armenia.

Opposition politicians and other government critics dismiss the significance of such statements, saying that corruption is one of the pillars of Armenia's political system that has allowed Kocharian, Sarkisian and other top officials to stay in power. They also say that Armenian law-enforcement agencies are themselves too corrupt to tackle the problem in earnest.

