

Additional Statement (3min):

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Topic: Self-Assessment Toolkit on Freedom of Information

In 2022, FOICA conducted a comprehensive survey on the state of freedom of information within the primary state structures of the Republic of Armenia. This study encompassed 39 state agencies, including the state agencies/ environmental information holders. Here are the key findings that offer an overall evaluation of the situation:

- It reaffirmed that Armenia possesses a robust law governing freedom of information, safeguarding this fundamental right also covering the Aarhus Convention points.
- However, it's evident that there is a gap between the law and its practical application. This point also related to environmental information holders.
- The research revealed that a notable portion of the violations can be attributed to a lack of awareness and expertise in the subject matter.
- Notably, the Republic of Armenia lacks an authorized body, committee, or ombudsman dedicated to overseeing the right of access to information.

The research outcomes underscore the urgent need for systemic reform. This may entail substantial changes, such as amending the constitution, to establish proper authority for freedom of information. So we decided to start from smaller but very important steps.

It's crucial to note that the assessment of the current state of education and training primarily falls under the purview of specialized Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). While their data collection is invaluable, it may not always be exhaustive due to objective constraints. Moreover, it may not fully address the existing requirements in this field or the legal obligations of the state.

In light of this, a collaborative effort was forged with the Government of the Republic of Armenia. This collaboration led to the development and implementation of self-assessment mechanisms for freedom of information in state administration bodies for the upcoming years. This commitment is also enshrined within the framework of the Open Government Partnership.

Within this collaborative initiative, the Center for Freedom of Information has produced a toolkit guide. This guide offers a user-friendly presentation of the steps information holders must take to adhere to the RA legislation on Freedom of Information and international standards.

The guide is divided into two parts:

1) sections where the minimum steps that the information manager must take to properly fulfill his responsibilities in the field of freedom of information are presented,

2) a questionnaire corresponding to the steps mentioned in each of the sections, in which by answering the presented questions simply "yes" or "no", the person in charge of information can assess whether he is fulfilling his duties in the field of freedom of information properly.

In Part 1, there are three sections:

- The first section delineates the steps that information holders must take to ensure the prerequisites for the proper execution of their duties in the field of freedom of information.
- The second section outlines the steps for information holders to proactively provide freedom of information by publishing information on their own initiative (proactive).
- The third section details the steps that data controllers must follow upon receiving a request for information, ensuring a responsive provision of freedom of information.

Each section presents the steps in the most effective order for implementation.

The Freedom of Information Center has already conducted training sessions for freedom information officers in state administration bodies. Participants received in-depth instruction on how to effectively utilize the guide.

This professional capacity-building event not only enhances the role of public relations professionals within the government structure but also empowers them with practical tools to address freedom of information issues.

As a result, every state institution in the Republic of Armenia, including the crucial Ministry of Environment, which is the designated authority for managing environmental information, will have the means to:

- Conduct a self-assessment of the freedom of information situation, gaining a clear understanding of the mandatory, and at the very least, required conditions for ensuring freedom of information.
- Receive a specific toolkit and roadmap for resolving identified problems.
- The toolkit is universal for all state bodies so importantly, this analysis and insight will be comparable with other state institutions, enabling us to address systemic issues and leverage the best practices of our partners in resolving our own challenges.
- The Ministry of Environment will have at its disposal a clear and accessible document outlining problems and potential solutions. This will serve as a reference for Public Relations specialists when requesting specific measures to address identified issues.

Beginning next year, this guide will also be implemented within the Ministry of Environment. While it may not be the sole solution to systemic issues, it marks a significant stride towards systemic transformation and the fortification of institutional culture.

Should any colleagues have an interest in this topic, I would be delighted to provide additional information. Looking ahead, I anticipate sharing concrete, measurable results in the coming year.

Thank you.