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New Watchdog to Monitor Court Web Sites

By Natalya Krainova

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A prominent human rights activist and two lawyers have created a public watchdog that will demand transparency from the courts, the founders said Tuesday.

The group, For Transparency of Justice, will aim to raise public awareness about judicial proceedings by monitoring courts' Internet resources for transparency and releasing its findings.

"The main task is not to leave the examination of a court's activities to the courtroom," said group co-founder Alexei Simonov, president of Glasnost Defense Foundation.

"It is the public that must carry out the examinations," he said by telephone.

The organization will use volunteers to analyze the quality of information on court web sites and blogs and advise court press services on how to effectively inform the public of court

activities on the web sites, said co-founder Denis Dvornikov, executive secretary of Civil Control, an elections watchdog.

The group plans to study the web sites of several courts across Russia during November and use the findings to prepare seminars for court press officers by Jan. 1, when activists will present the seminars in 10 regions over six months, Dvornikov said.

The November study will "help draft the standards for a court's web site," Dvornikov said.

The group's creation was timed with a federal law that took effect in July and obliges courts to provide information about their activities to the public, he said.

The Russian branch of the International Lawyers Association will provide young volunteers for the November study and offer "consultations with courts on the international practice of securing transparency of courts' activities," said the third co-founder, Anatoly Kapustin, president of the Russian branch.

The new organization may have its work cut out for it. An initial study of court web sites by the St. Petersburg-based Institute for Information Freedom Development has found them lacking.

"We examined the web sites for compliance with the July law and the convenience of use, and they turned out to be far from ideal," the institute's chief lawyer, Darya Sukhikh, said by phone Tuesday.

The institute released a rating of the transparency of court web sites on Aug. 12 after studying more than 2,400 sites over a month.

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