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Anti-Corruption Efforts: Words, Not Deeds

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Analysts at the Justice Ministry have reviewed official statistics and concluded that there has been no improvement in the battle against corruption. The actual number of corrupt officials exposed and punished has not increased over the last three years, though the topic is much more frequently in the news.

Judging from media reporting on the subject, the battle against corruption is being waged effectively. Reports about such crimes have become far more frequent in the past year, according to data from Medialogia.

From January 2008 through fall 2009, about 100 instances of corruption being "exposed" were reported daily, according to the company's analysis of more than 4,500 media sources. Last fall, the number of such reports peaked at 224 per day and then leveled off at an average of 125 daily.

The real situation remains unchanged, however, according to the Justice Ministry's corruption research institute, which analyzed police and judicial data.

Researchers compared data from 2007 to 2009 from the Interior Ministry and the Supreme Court's legal department about the leading corruption crimes: abuse of power (Article 201 of the Criminal Code), commercial bribery (Article 204), abuse of authority (Article 285), illegal participation in entrepreneurial activity (Article 289), receiving bribes and taking bribes (Articles 290 and 291, respectively).

A total of 21,842 such crimes were registered in 2007, of which 6,185 made it to court. Of those that went to court, 675 people were sent to prison, 3,650 received suspended sentences, and 1,744 were fined.

Last year, the figures were largely unchanged, with 23,518 corruption crimes registered, or 7.6 percent more than 2007. Of those, 6,691 went to trial, 903 people were imprisoned, 3,694 received suspended sentences, and 1,926 were fined.

It turns out that on average, only one in 25 of the total cases resulted in someone spending time behind bars. Looking at the numbers for those cases that actually went to trial, one in eight of those accused went to prison.

In 2007, verdicts of a suspended sentence or a fine were handed down to 86.9 percent of the accused, while in 2009, the figure was 85.2 percent, according to the authors of the research. Furthermore, the maximum possible sentence of three to five years incarceration for abuse of power was not used at all in the last two years; the maximum punishment for bribe taking — from five to eight years in prison — was only used four times in 2009.

The research suggests that there have been no real gains in the battle against corruption.

"The possible consequences are not a serious deterrent," the researchers wrote in the report.

Positive trends are noticeable only in the area of minor corruption, said Viktor Astanin, the research institute's deputy head. There was a 10 percent increase in those crimes being registered last year, he said.

The Interior Ministry and the Supreme Court declined to comment.

The materials required further study, an Interior Ministry spokesperson said.

"We have to understand to what extent the statistics used in the study were correctly interpreted," said Pavel Odintsov, press secretary of the Supreme Court.

An official close to the presidential administration said this was the first time such research had been conducted.

Under its obligations to the Council of Europe's anti-corruption committee, Russia is supposed to create a continuous monitoring system for corruption statistics, the official added.

Current statistics do not take into consideration a number of criteria, so a clear picture of the

situation is impossible to obtain, and adequate responses are not being made, he conceded.

A poll taken of 1,000 employees of the Interior Ministry, Prosecutor General's Office, Investigative Committee, Justice Ministry and other government officials in 80 regions revealed that only 27.3 percent trusted information about corruption that they receive from law enforcement agencies and prosecutors. They say the statistical data is "tweaked and falsified."

The battle against corruption in a systematically corrupt country is a political question, and not one for law enforcement or the courts, said Yelena Panfilova, head of Transparency International in Russia. It's pointless to blame statistics — they only give an indication of the effectiveness of law enforcement and the courts, not corruption itself, she said.

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