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Corruption Fatigue

By Kirill Kabanov

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In an April 22 comment in Moskovsky Komsomolets, political analyst Stanislav Belkovsky called for the arrest of Health and Social Development Minister Tatyana Golikova and her husband, Industry and Trade Minister Viktor Khristenko, on charges of corruption. In particular, Belkovsky accused the health ministry of pilfering funds for tomographic scanners and recalled that Golikova had promoted a drug called Arbidol that is produced by Pharmstandard, a company believed to have close links to her family.

Russians, suffering from corruption fatigue, have had a rather ho-hum reaction to the Golikova and Khristenko scandal. It is long been accepted as a given that the higher an official's rank, the more opportunities he or she has to embezzle.

Some analysts say the campaign against Khristenko and Golikova was intended to spark an investigation in the State Duma. But this theory does not hold water since the Duma has never been a mechanism to carry out independent investigations — particularly into Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's allies.

Analysts have been discussing publicly for several years whether Khristenko and Golikova have abused their authority. The fact that my National Anti-Corruption Committee has not yet received conclusive proof does not necessarily rule out the validity of the allegations. The Health and Social Development Ministry has been repeatedly involved in scandals where hundreds of millions of dollars disappear from government purchases each year. A narrow circle of businesspeople and government officials independently decide which big-ticket medical equipment to purchase and at what price. This kind of criminal activity has been well documented.

Even after being charged by President Dmitry Medvedev with uncovering corruption, the Investigative Committee has been unable to identify any of the most egregious embezzlers in the government.

At the same time, the average life expectancy has dropped to 150th place, ranking Russia alongside the world's least-developed countries. Medical and health-care services are themselves battling for survival, and even the authorities have declared that the country's medical system does not make use of modern scientific and technical advancements.

Nearly all efforts to introduce legal mechanisms to combat government corruption have been undermined. For example, even if it becomes known that a senior government official gave his wife or girlfriend a car costing $1 million, there is no legal basis for questioning how he obtained those funds.

Similarly, there are no legal grounds for establishing the real beneficiaries of offshore companies holding shares in Russia's largest companies or for tracking the disappearance of budgetary funds allocated to enterprises. Prosecutors and investigators are not empowered by the law to question government officials about such transactions. Clearly, those in power have applied pressure to law enforcement officials and judges when necessary.

This is why Medvedev is so angry and frustrated when those charged with investigating corruption respond with nothing more substantial than accusations and counter-accusations from competing financial interest groups. The truth about who are the country's worst embezzlers will remain hidden in offshore bank accounts, far from the public eye.

The Arab Spring offers another scenario for responding to rampant corruption. But it would be preferable to avoid a similar uprising in Russia. That is why Medvedev is attempting to initiate effective anti-corruption measures that include increased political competition, effective mass media and a more robust civil society.

For those measures to work, however, Russia needs to modernize its way of thinking.

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