

The Fight Against Corruption Is Simple

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Using public office for personal benefit is a terrible evil. This kind of corruption amounts to a tax that every Russian citizen pays in the form of exorbitantly priced goods and services.

Bribes represent only a small part of this "tax." Officials often collect bribes by creating excessive layers of red tape that only they can cut through — for a price. This has the effect of decreasing competition in the market, raising prices and lowering quality for the end user.

Political leaders are absolutely right in wanting to fight corruption. But it is necessary to understand that corrupt officials have powerful defenses, with the first being the myths surrounding corruption itself.

Myth No. 1 is that the fight against corruption cannot be won. Myth No. 2 is that eliminating corruption is so difficult that any attempt is almost futile.

To combat these myths, the government must adopt realistic goals and bear in mind that the fight against corruption is not so much a long and costly process of institutional reform as it is the expression of political willpower in specific situations. It's as simple as that.

Of course, Russia needs to fulfill other requirements first if it hopes to defeat corruption. It must have a competitive and flexible political system in which, among other things, votes are counted honestly and all candidates and parties are free to participate in elections. The media must be fully developed, and this means not only having one or two independent media outlets, but also allowing open and free competition on the media market. Lastly, the court system must be independent of political interests, especially the executive branch of government.

Given the current reality of the Russian system, even a little progress could be considered a victory. It is unfeasible and therefore pointless to set the goal of "eradicating" corruption completely. However, it is possible and worthwhile to reduce the level of corruption to that seen in Brazil and Peru, and eventually to the level in Greece. Russians should not be ashamed of setting such a goal. Rather, we should be ashamed of how we live now.

At the heart of the second myth — the idea that battling corruption is an exceedingly difficult process — is the assumption that political willpower is only expressed in terms of large-scale programs and the passage of weighty laws. In fact, it is enough for a senior politician to simply fire a corrupt subordinate. Of course, no particular political willpower is required to dismiss someone whom a court of law has found guilty of corruption, but it is needed in large supply when firing someone whom a leader has good reason to believe — based on media reports or other evidence — has been involved in corrupt practices. No doubt the person who gets sacked will raise a clamor, remind his employer of their long personal friendship and possibly even threaten to sue for wrongful dismissal. The senior official will simply have to endure the unpleasantness, remind his old friend that nothing can justify taking kickbacks on state contracts and that he is free to seek justice through the courts if he feels he has been wronged. In other words, all that is needed to stop corruption is a little personal integrity and political willpower.

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