The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
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Corruption Index Keeps Russia in 'Zone of Shame'

By Alec Luhn

December 04, 2012



This year's ranking will serve as a benchmark for assessing anti-corruption efforts in years to come, said Yelena Panfilova, director of Transparency International Russia.

Even as the government wages a high-profile anti-corruption campaign, Russia remains in the bottom third of Transparency International's corruption index, released Wednesday. The nation ranked on par with Kazakhstan, Iran and Honduras.

This is "the zone of national shame," said Yelena Panfilova, director of Transparency International Russia. It indicates an "incorrect attitude on the part of the authorities toward fighting corruption and a lack of participation on the part of society in fighting corruption."

On a 100-point scale inversely proportionate to the level of corruption, Russia scored a meager 28 this year, tying it for 133rd-most corrupt of 174 nations. Last year, it came in 143rd of 182.

But the study's authors said the ostensible improvement in rank was misleading, as changes in data sources and methodology made this year's ranking virtually incomparable with the previous one. However, new rankings will be commensurate.

The government is very keen to improve Russia's international rankings in many fields as it tries to showcase the country as a good investment opportunity. Russia has consistently placed low in many rankings, such as the World Bank's Doing Business report, prompting complaints from government officials about unfair treatment.

This year's release of the annual Corruption Perception's Index follows a slew of high-profile anti-corruption cases, the most prominent of which was the Nov. 6 dismissal of Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov amid a scandal involving the sale of ministry assets at prices below market value.

The ranking does not reflect the recent anti-corruption campaign, Panfilova said. However, she added, it will serve as a benchmark for assessing the progress of the campaign in years to come.

This year's study marked the introduction of a 100-point rating system and other adaptations that will henceforth allow for comparisons between yearly results, she said.

"The change in methodology and the new 100-point system is very timely for Russia for the simple reason that we are experiencing a relatively new period in the regime's attitude toward fighting corruption," Panfilova said. "The regime has suddenly gotten going."

Russia ranked behind all other G20 countries, as well as such former Soviet republics as Belarus (123), Armenia (105), Georgia (51) and the Baltic states. As with last year's results, Russia remains in the bottom third of the list, which Panfilova hopes it will change in the future.

Denmark, Finland and New Zealand tied for first place with a score of 90, while Afghanistan, North Korea and Somalia came in last.

The ostensible war on corruption campaign has drawn mixed interpretations, with many castigating it as the manifestation of a clan war within the Kremlin rather than the start of a systematic anti-corruption campaign.

According to Panfilova, events such as Serdyukov's ouster and the accusal of a recently retired Cabinet member of corruption are likely the result of both Kremlin power struggles and a wider campaign against corruption. She noted that recent corruption scandals have occurred mostly in spheres related to the regime's two prime concerns: social stability and security.

"It's no longer possible for the authorities to not fight corruption in the country," Panfilova said. "Leaving everything as it is ... would be risky for the stability of the regime over the next six years."

Regardless of the reasons behind it, the crackdown on corruption is hitting home, said Kirill Kabanov, head of the National Anti-Corruption Committee think tank.

"Even if it is a clan war ... it is having a good effect," Kabanov said. "For us, the main thing is

the result."

Both Panfilova and Kabanov pointed out as a positive development the appearance of several anti-corruption legislative measures.

Most recently, Putin signed amendments to a law on public officials that would require Cabinet members to report their expenditures and those of their spouses and underage children if the sum of a financial transaction is greater than their declared income over the past three years.

The two also praised recent grassroots efforts on reporting corruption, such as the iPhone application Bribr, with Kabanov noting that such crowdsourcing efforts can also have a significant effect on the wider problem.

Panfilova said it was her dream that participation in civil society would grow so that "the public will to fight corruption meets the political will."

Irina Yarovaya, head of the State Duma's committee for fighting corruption, refused to comment on the rating specifically but said that "according to international standards, a very modern and progressive system for fighting corruption has been formed in Russia."

"Even those who treat our country with bias are forced to admit it," she said.

Kremlin chief of staff Sergei Ivanov said in March that Western ratings, in particular those by Transparency International, were "arbitrary."

Ivanov called for a Russian rating to be created, saying it should assess every Russian region separately because the situation differed very much from one region to another.

No government official contacted on Wednesday would comment on the rating. A government spokesman asked for a faxed inquiry to be submitted for consideration within a month.

Staff writer Natalya Krainova contributed reporting.

The average bribe in Russia is about 60,000 rubles ($2,000), the Interior Ministry's anti-corruption department head, Alexei Ryabtsev, told Argumenty i Fakty in an interview published Wednesday.

The head of the State Duma's anti-corruption committee, Irina Yarovaya, proposed on Tuesday that graft be considered a crime against the state, entailing a maximum of 20 years behind bars.

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