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Putin Creates New Anti-Corruption Department

By Delphine d'Amora

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The Kremlin announced Tuesday that President Vladimir Putin had founded a new department in the presidential administration specifically devoted to fighting corruption, the latest government initiative to combat one of the country's most stubborn problems.

The new department will oversee the work of verifying officials' income and expense declarations; uncovering and eliminating any potential conflicts of interest for government officials; and alerting law enforcement authorities about possible corruption schemes in state organs, among other duties.

The department will be headed by little-known Putin aide Oleg Plokhoi, whose surname, which is the same as the Russian word for "bad," prompted snickers from observers.

Putin speaks frequently about the government's need to fight corruption, calling it one of the country's main obstacles to development. International groups and opposition leaders give

similar assessments, although the opposition often says Putin is only paying lip service to the problem.

Perhaps not coincidentally, just before the Kremlin's announcement about the new department, anti-corruption watchdog Transparency International released the 2013 edition of its Corruption Perceptions Index.

Russia rose six places from its 133rd-place ranking in last year's index, a ranking of public sector corruption as perceived by business people and country experts, but its score remained constant at 28 out of 100 possible points.The score put it in a nine-way tie with countries including Pakistan, Azerbaijan and the Gambia.

New Zealand and Denmark were ranked the most transparent in the ranking, with scores of 91, followed by Finland, Sweden, Norway, Singapore, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Australia and Canada. Afghanistan, North Korea and Somalia were seen as having the most corrupt governments, each receiving a score of 8.

Transparency International creates its ranking using a combination of surveys and assessments conducted by 13 separate institutions based on government and business climate data collected in the last two years.

Yelena Panifilova, head of Transparency International's Russia branch, said increasing government oversight alone would not solve the problem.

"It is necessary for not only the government to battle corruption," Panifilova said at a press conference Tuesday, Interfax reported.

The government needs to develop channels to involve civil society in the battle with bribery and to better protect individuals who expose corruption, she said, adding that the poor results in the ranking were expected and showed that little progress has been made.

Speaking about the new Kremlin anti-corruption unit, Panfilova said she hoped it would act to coordinate already-existing efforts to fight graft in the government, as, by her count, there are 12 separate state entities currently working on the problem.

"Right now the prosecutor's office handles oversight and coordination of anti-corruption efforts," Panfilova told Interfax. "The Labor and Social Services Ministry is responsible for officials, their declarations and conflicts of interest. The Federal Anti-Monopoly Service is responsible for state orders."

"Anti-corruption legislation is mostly handled by the Justice Ministry and partly by the Economic Development Ministry," Panfilova said. "The Interior Ministry catches [corrupt officials], the Investigative Committee investigates [them], and the Federal Security Service catches high-ranking officials who commit corruption crimes."

According to parliamentarian Irina Yarovaya, who heads the State Duma's Security and Anti-Corruption Committee, the new Kremlin department will take on "practical tasks stemming from presidential orders and previously passed laws."

In a statement posted on her committee's website, Yarovaya echoed Putin's oft-repeated

refrain that closer attention would soon be paid to upholding the rule of law in Russia.

"In my opinion, in the nearest future everything related to the strict observance of the law and to its implementation, to respect for the law as a guarantee of general security, will become a top priority in society and in the government," Yarovaya said.

Contact the authors at d.damore@imedia.ru and e.pfeifer@imedia.ru

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