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Individual Scandals: Russians Don't Believe in Anti-Corruption Campaign

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Anton Vaganov / TASS

Russians are having a difficult time making sense of the recent string of corruption scandals involving senior state officials. A case in point concerns former Economic Development Minister Alexei Ulyukayev, whom the authorities detained 10 days ago on charges of extortion and accepting a bribe of $2 million.

According to a Levada Center survey, even though one in three Russians has kept abreast of these developments, and almost half of Russians have at least heard of them, there is no consensus on what it all means. Only 36 percent believe it is a sign that the authorities are "starting a serious fight against corruption in the government," 30 percent think it is simply the fallout from infighting among officials struggling for influence, and 21 percent see it as evidence that law enforcement is pressuring the economic bloc of the government.

This time around, state-controlled television did not offer the standard interpretation of

events or even provide riveting video of the arrest. President Vladimir Putin and Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev issued only terse statements to the effect that nobody is above the law. There is a good reason for that, said Levada Center Deputy Director Alexei Grazhdankin: Unlike previous high-profile corruption cases, this time the suspect really does have close ties to the leadership, and hasty accusations would have raised questions about the foresightedness of rulers. Even without that, 47 percent of respondents feel the charges against Ulyukayev put Dmitry Medvedev in a bad light, and 38 percent feel they compromise Vladimir Putin. That is a significant number, Grazhdankin said: It is more than twice the number of people who disapprove of the president's performance in general.

The Ulyukayev affair differs from previous corruption cases – such as those involving former Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, former anti-corruption official Dmitry Zakharchenko, or Prosecutor General Yury Chaika, who was investigated by the Anti-Corruption Foundation – in that an unusually large number of Russians – 27 percent – see it as a single, isolated case of corruption. Only 12 percent felt that way about the Serdyukov case. Over time, in fact, Russians increasingly see such cases as isolated instances of corruption rather than signs of endemic malfeasance. That number has fallen from 80 percent during the Serdyukov scandal to 64 percent today.

According to Grazhdankin, the overwhelming majority of Russians continue to believe that Russia suffers from systemic corruption, in part because of their experience in the 1990s. Still, according to Transparency International vice-president Elena Panfilova, Russians prefer not to openly accuse the President or Prime Minister of corruption, a fact illustrated by the latest Global Corruption Barometer report.

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