

Russia Is Failing On Corruption. Here's Why.

State-backed show trials might make for good PR, but they do nothing for the fight against financial crime

By [Anton Pominov](#)

January 25, 2017



TASS

Transparency International has published its [latest Corruption Perceptions Index \(CPI\)](#). Top of the rankings were Denmark, New Zealand, Finland, Sweden and Switzerland. Last place was shared by Somalia, South Sudan, North Korea, Syria and Yemen. Russia was not far off the bottom pack — 131st place out of 176.

The factors that ensure a rise to the top of the ratings are clear: democracy, political competition, an independent judiciary, a free press, as well as strong economic development. Conversely, it is just as clear that the practical absence of a state — the

examples of Somalia, Syria and South Sudan — is a guarantee of last place in the rating. Another guarantee of poor ratings is centralised state power at the expense of civil society and legal accountability.

Russia is an example of this latter trend. It has shown only minor changes over the past five years: in this time, its ranking has improved by just one point out of a hundred. Russia's continuing low marks are particularly striking in light of a highly visible anti-corruption campaign launched last year.

Transparency International's report includes recommendations for what to do to move up in the Index. But Russia ignores the guidelines. Instead, the country's leadership has launched a purely emblematic battle against corruption. It is impossible to rise to the top rungs of our rating with directives like "convict 300 people for corruption" or "arrest a governor." Last year, a federal minister was arrested for the first time.

These moves are superficial and fail to address the root of the problem: institutions.

In December 2014, we recommended introducing protections for whistleblowers and an electronic system for the public declaration of officials' income and property. We also suggested removing excessive regulation of the press and civic organisations that act as anti-corruption watchdogs. Those are the kind of institutional changes that would impact the country's corruption ranking right away.

We continue to advise against increasing the number of anti-corruption administrators in the security agencies. Such a move could, in theory, be effective. But just as easily, it will have exactly the opposite effect.

Here are our recommendations for 2017: draft and pass laws on lobbying and on the protection of whistleblowers, require law enforcement agencies to respond to public and press investigations, ensure the economic independence of the courts from the executive branch, engage in international cooperation in asset recovery and in uncovering beneficial owners.

Showing a TV program about the arrest of another high-ranking official is, of course, an excellent display of state initiative. There have been dozens of these trials this year alone. Unfortunately, effective anti-corruption measures based on institutional change lack the PR glamour of high profile trials, but they are significantly more effective.

In China, there is the death penalty for corruption — every official who is caught stealing is shot and replaced by another, and nobody can be sure that they too will not suffer the same fate. This is an efficient way to ensure new hires. It is clearly not so great for combating corruption.

Here are some other recommendations. Court chairmen should be elected and the distribution of cases among them should be random. Russia needs to participate, finally, in international efforts to return illicit assets.

Another important point: no country in the top 20 of our index found fault with its independent media or the activities of its civil society. We say it year after year: those are our

allies in the fight against corruption, not enemies of the state. Finally, we need fair elections. Not just once, but every time.

None of this is particularly original. It is taught in most political science and economics departments and it is also confirmed by life experience. The countries in the first third of the index have more in common than not. But there are countries and leaders that prefer to go their own way. At their best, they go overboard. At their worst, they are corrupt autocrats themselves.

Thieves and corruptioneers should, of course, be punished. But you should not expect to achieve long-term results or to move up the CPI rankings by repression alone. Indeed, you cannot win by fighting corruption. To win, you have to build institutions.

Anton Pominov is executive director of Transparency International — Russia

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/01/25/russia-is-failing-on-corruption-heres-why-a56927>