

By Olgha Tsiskarishvili\*

University admissions in Georgia have always provided an opportunity for bribery, as corrupt officials routinely take bribes from students who don't meet the proper requirements but were admitted anyway with the offer of enough money.

The government was the first to acknowledge corruption in higher education was rampant, and it intended to tackle the problem with in-depth education reform, which included mandatory standardized entrance examinations.

“The era of corruption in the educational system of Georgia is over,” said President Mikheil Saakashvili in July 2005, when the examinations were applied for the first time to over 31,000 students.

He might have celebrated a little too early. Today, as the margin to manipulate the examinations has been practically eliminated, corruption in Georgian higher education might have decreased, but it has also proved to be far from over.

In a 2008 survey in Telavi State University, students were asked whether they had ever bribed teachers. One-fifth answered affirmatively.

Also, more than 60 percent of the students responded that it is “very easy” or “sufficiently easy” to pay bribes to achieve high scores in the university.

The detention of deputy rector of the Tbilisi Business and Law International University, David Katamadze, for the alleged creation of false documentation, is a clear reminder that corruption persists.

Katamadze is undergoing investigation after the police found false diplomas and other documents in his possession.

Corruption extends to secondary education as well. “My child failed to pass an exam in order to graduate that semester. As a result, I had to pay a bribe so he could graduate,” says a parent who wishes to remain anonymous.

He added that when he was asked for a notification for absence — a document explaining why his son missed a class — he could buy it for 6 GEL (US\$3.50).

All fingers point to low salaries as a major cause of corruption. Teaching is not a prestigious occupation and salaries in the sector are way below the national average of 368 GEL (US\$220) per month.

“Gardeners receive 300 GEL (US\$180) more than teachers,” Zviad Miminoshvili, an expert at the Accreditation National Center Program, recently told *Georgia Today*.

Rusiko Kvashilava, a 54-year-old physics teacher, says that with her low salary she’s hardly able to afford textbooks for her 10-year-old son. “Last year I borrowed textbooks in Russian from my neighbor,” she told the same publication.

The Ministry of Education increased salaries on September 2009 and announced that increases will continue on an annual basis. “Salaries for teachers define teaching quality,” said Minister Nika Gvaramia.

#### Perception and efforts

As in the education sector, the Georgian government has maintained its interest in enforcing the Anti-Corruption Operational Plan launched in 2005, which proposes a set of ambitious reforms it calls “radical.” It later created an anti-corruption board tasked with renovating the plan.

Anti-corruption movements are nowadays among the most important topics in Georgia, even more so than delicate topics such as the August 2008 Georgia-Russia war.

According to the Global Corruption Barometer 2009, 57 percent of the citizens consider the government’s actions either “very effective” or “somewhat effective,” and only 2 percent of respondents report having had to pay a bribe. Almost 40 percent confirmed they’re willing to pay a premium to support transparent and ethical business practices.

However, the judiciary continues to be perceived by citizens as the most corrupt institution, as it did in 2005 and 2007.

Other institutions poorly ranked, from least trusted to most trusted, are: the civil service (seen as vastly corrupt by 21 percent of the respondents), Parliament (16 percent), political parties (12 percent), private sector (9 percent), and media (6 percent).

In fact, Georgia ranked fifth among the worst European and Central Asian countries in judiciary corruption.

Tamuna Karosanidze, executive director of Transparency International Georgia, said the lack of public confidence puts the sustainability of the anti-corruption results achieved, and the prospect of Georgia's democratic transition at risk.

She says Georgian citizens strongly support anti-corruption campaigns, but they don't trust the courts. This causes a dilemma that reaches into the anti-corruption movements and the country's efforts to build a democracy.

"Reforming the judiciary must become a real priority of the Georgian state, and whether or not it is successful should be assessed based on how people's attitudes change toward it," Karosanidze says.

### Key weaknesses

Georgia's governance system continues to have key weaknesses, as illustrated in the 2008 Global Integrity Report.

Government accountability is weak, as accountability mechanisms and processes to keep executive and judicial power in check are limited and poor.

The chief executive rarely gives reasons for policy decisions because "there is no formal necessity for explanation and, due to the lack of freedom of media, it is rather difficult to get any information other than government-produced propaganda."

Georgia also suffers from deep problems within its administration and civil service. For instance, there are no regulations governing conflicts of interest for government officials involved in privatization.

Deputy Public Defender Giorgi Chkheidze thinks the current anti-corruption strategy is a step in the right direction. The government concurs that it needs a systematic approach to these problems.

For Aleksi Aleksishvili, former minister of finance, abolishing corruption requires the overall regulation of financial services.

Per Eklund, representative of the European Commission, says there has been noticeable progress in the judicial, educational and economic sectors, and freedom of speech should be protected.

“The year 2008 was quite difficult. We had two elections and a war. Now we are looking forward to democratic reforms,” he said.

### Steps forward

The reforms implemented so far may not have succeeded at eradicating corruption, but they have created some improvement and have shown there is cause for optimism.

Before the education reform, students were required to memorize material in order to obtain good scores. With the current methodology, independent analytical thinking is promoted. Teacher Rusiko Kvashilava says she can see that students are already taking individual approaches to subjects.

“The tenth grade made a presentation about the solar system and it was very interesting for me, as I saw so much individualism in what they knew. Although my salary is extremely low, I am very satisfied with my profession,” she said with a smile.

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