By Galina Stolyarova

One day in April 2007, human rights lawyer Olga Tseitlina got a sudden call to a St. Petersburg police station. She had been asked to represent a client detained and fined for allegedly swearing in public. She soon discovered that police had used similar evidence against nearly 100 others.

They had all been rounded up during an April 15 demonstration called by an opposition group, The Other Russia Coalition. In theory, the right to protest is guaranteed by the Constitution of the Russian Federation, but Tseitlina alleges that Russian police use any means they have to suppress such events.

“One police statement ordering a person’s detention for swearing in a public place may not look suspicious. But if we collect more than 50 identical statements… then it becomes clear that the evidence was contrived,” Tseitlina said.

Severe police violence against peaceful street protesters in Moscow and St. Petersburg has prompted high-level criticism of President Vladimir Putin’s government abroad. But not a single police officer is known to have been punished.

During one opposition rally, Sergei Gulyayev, a member of the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly at the time, suffered a broken right arm. Gulyayev demanded to view, face-to-face, all members of the police squad involved in the incident so that he could identify who inflicted the injury. But Gulyayev says he has been shown only dated, passport-size photos that make identification impossible.

In this case, it appears the unspoken impunity protecting the police is stronger than the theoretical immunity to such treatment conferred on Gulyayev as a member of the Legislative Assembly.

Street protests in Moscow and St. Petersburg have resulted in scores of people being injured and hundreds being arrested. One of the main aims of demonstrators has been to highlight the vast and growing extent of corruption in Russia, evidence of which has continued to pile up.

In 2006, five people were arrested in connection with one of Russia’s biggest corruption scandals, “the case of “The Three Whales.” The Three Whales was the name of a
store that sold furniture that was allegedly smuggled in from the West with help of the Russian security services. The scheme is said to have cost the state 18 million rubles (US$704,143) in lost revenue.

The Moscow-based anti-corruption campaign group Information Science for Democracy (INDEM) wants to know more about the role of Yury Zaostrovtsev, the former head of security at The Three Whales. A former top official of the Federal Security Service, Zaostrovtsev was allegedly responsible for clearing imported goods through customs.

The Three Whales case has dragged on since December 2000. The first arrests weren’t made until last year. So far, no state official has faced charges. The slow progress and the alleged role of the powerful security services suggest the huge scale of the obstacles facing those whose try to stamp out corruption in Russia.

The General Prosecutor’s Office reports it has launched nearly 600 corruption cases since July 2006. But INDEM claims that millions of corruption crimes are committed every year to the tune of around 7.5 trillion roubles (US$300 billion), roughly the same size as Russia’s yearly federal budget.

In 2006, Russia ratified the UN Convention against Corruption and the Council of Europe’s Criminal Law Convention on Corruption, and the State Duma (the lower house of the Federation Council of Russia) is now trying to integrate these into legislation. But some experts warn that, in Russia, tough laws can be undermined by slack implementation.

In Russia, it’s almost routine for people to have to bribe bureaucrats to obtain documents, register property or secure a place for their child in school. But the National Anti-Corruption Committee, a Moscow-based NGO, says such low-level payments make up less than a fifth of all corruption. The committee suggests a deputy’s seat in the State Duma can be bought for about 125 billion roubles (US$5 million). To secure a mid-level clerk’s job in a municipal body — where a corrupt bureaucrat can expect a regular flow of bribes — may cost around 150,000 roubles (US$6,000).

Those trying to fight corruption may face grave dangers. In September 2006, Andrei Kozlov, first deputy chairman of Russia’s Central Bank, was gunned down in an apparent contract killing. Kozlov had led a clean-up campaign that caused about 40 banks to have their licenses revoked.
because they failed to meet transparency standards, or were suspected of money laundering or other illegal schemes.

In January 2007, prosecutors claimed to have cracked the Kozlov murder when they arrested Alexei Frenkel, the chief executive officer of VIP-Bank. The bank was one of those closed down in Kozlov's campaign. Frenkel insists he is innocent. Liana Askerova, a businesswoman who earlier gave testimony against Frenkel, has since withdrawn it saying it was extracted under pressure.

Some independent experts say they doubt Frenkel is the man behind the killing. Kirill Kabanov of the National Anti-Corruption Committee says prosecutors in several European countries are probing the overseas links of another bank, Diskont, which was also shut down shortly before the murder of Kozlov. This foreign interest was aroused after an Austrian bank alerted Russian authorities to multi-million-dollar transfers allegedly made by Diskont to off-shore companies.

But, says Kabanov, Russian prosecutors are showing much less interest in Diskont. “The money-laundering scheme apparently involved major Russian banks and top-ranking Russian officials,” claims Kabanov. “Our investigations suggest millions of dollars are now being invested in attempts to hush the Kozlov case up.”

The murder of Kozlov was one of a series of high-profile killings last autumn that have seriously damaged Russia’s image overseas. One of the victims was journalist Anna Politkovskaya, who was gunned down in her apartment building. She had written many acidic attacks on the Putin government, especially over Chechnya.

Politkovskaya had also been in contact with former Russian secret service man Alexander Litvinenko. His death from radiation poisoning in London led to much speculation over whether current or former Russian security officers could be involved in liquidating enemies of the Russian state. British police claimed they had enough evidence to charge a former KGB officer with Litvinenko’s murder.

In August 2007, Russia’s prosecutor general, Yury Chaika, announced that his staff had solved the murder of Politkovskaya. Ten people, including an alleged Chechen hit man, were arrested in connection with the killing. Chaika alleged that several police officers and a security services colonel had been involved in the plot to kill her. The prosecutor stopped short of naming those who
ordered the murder but said that their identities had been established.

In a late 2006 report, the Committee to Protect Journalists called Russia “the third-deadliest country in the world for journalists over the past 15 years.” And a UN special rapporteur who investigated the killings of 13 journalists in Russia since 2000 concluded most had been targeted because of reports they wrote on corruption or human rights abuses in Chechnya.

A series of controversial bills passed by the State Duma have been condemned by human rights advocates as a major threat to freedom. In July 2007, President Putin signed amendments to the law on combating extremism. His supporters say these new clauses target nationalists and tighten the definition of extremism.

Among new offenses are “humiliating national pride” and “hooliganism committed for political or ideological motives.” Another offense, “public slander of state officials,” will carry a penalty of up to three years in prison. The intelligence services will be allowed to tap the phones of anyone suspected of extremism.

These clauses appear to leave room for wide interpretation, with the risk that they can be deployed against peaceful opposition groups as well as extremists bent on violence.

Amendments to election laws have given the government broad powers to regulate, investigate and close down political parties. In the coming elections, all candidates will be chosen from party lists. Critics argue this will encourage political corruption as it transfers power from voters to party managers who will control who gets on the ballot.

Of 35 opposition parties in Russia, at least 17 have been shut down under the new legislation. Parties with fewer than 50,000 members or based in too few regions are now banned from elections. Coalitions of political parties also are excluded.

While state executives are forbidden from endorsing any party during election campaigns, this rule has often been breached. During the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly elections in March, huge billboards appeared showing governor Valentina Matviyenko, a close ally of President Putin, with Vadim Tyulpanov, the local United Russia leader, under the slogan “Together We Can Do Everything.”
It certainly looked like blatant political campaigning, but United Russia officials defended this as “social advertising.” Critics suggest it means the ruling elite in Russia are free to ignore electoral law when and where it chooses to.

At the start of 2007, more than 22,000 complaints were pending against Russian authorities at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg, France. Russia accounts for nearly a quarter of all cases taken to the court. Most applicants to the court complain that decisions made by Russia’s courts have not been enforced or that civil and criminal proceedings are excessively lengthy.

Russian human rights lawyers claim the courts deliberately drag their feet to discourage citizens from standing up for their rights. A litigant can win a case against the state but still be defeated by the system. One lawyer recounted a case in which he secured a ruling that the deportation of his clients would be illegal. But by the time he’d won on paper, the hapless litigants already had been deported.

Overall, the events of the last year show that prosecutors are largely losing the battle against graft. At the same time, the executive branch is centralizing and strengthening its power. The Kremlin stands accused of moves that undermine democracy and take Russia further down the road to authoritarian rule. And those who try to stand in the way of these changes can expect to be trampled or injured in the process.