

By Galina Stolyarova

Timur has dark skin. He cuts his hair short and wears a few days' worth of stubble. He could pass for a Chechen. As a result, he often gets stopped in the street for identity checks by the police during "anti-terrorist" crackdowns. If he leaves his identification card at home, a 500-ruble (US\$20) sweetener will soon see him on his way. He calls it a "foreigner tax."

"Real Chechens have to pay twice as much," he once said. He made that discovery at the police station when an unusually diligent police officer took him in to verify his ID.

A Clean Crusade Against Graft

Timur's case is not unique. In the Russian Federation, corruption has penetrated all spheres of life: it thrives in schools and universities, clinics and hospitals, municipalities, parliaments, police stations, and courts.

It is almost routine for people to have to bribe bureaucrats to obtain documents, register property or secure a place for their children in school.

Experts roughly divide everyday bribes into two categories: "Survival bribes" are paid to the police or in courts, medical institutions or universities when people feel cornered. "Comfort bribes" are given for the sake of saving time and avoiding excessive bureaucracy — to speed up the process of getting a passport or driver's license, for instance.

The existence and vast scope of corruption in Russia is officially and publicly recognized at all levels of society, up to Kremlin politicians.

Fighting Corruption — a Laughing Matter?

Shortly after taking office in May 2008, Russia's new President Dmitry Medvedev launched what he promised would be a massive cleanup crusade, complete with the creation of a special task force at the Russian General Prosecutor's Office.

But some question how Medvedev, who took power in a questionable election in a country where opposition and watchdog voices are muffled, could ever be serious about such an effort.

Cleanups are doomed as long as Russia embraces politics that act as a hothouse for graft and chicanery. Corruption in modern Russia has become a key tool for the governing of the country. Political corruption — when the very idea of elections is discredited, when parliament seats and government jobs have a negotiable price — is the most cynical form of corruption.

“Medvedev himself is the product of a highly corrupt system. In his speeches he denies that media censorship exists in Russia,” Boris Vishnevsky, a member of the political council of the St. Petersburg branch of the Russian United Democratic Party Yabloko (*Rossiyskaya obyedinyonnaya demokraticeskaya partiya Yabloko, RODP Yabloko*), said.

With the March 2, 2008, presidential vote approaching, the name Medvedev was everywhere. During that time, a revealing joke became hugely popular in the country, which perfectly captured an attitude shared by a significant slice of the electorate.

As the joke goes, Russian authorities had devised a new ballot for the forthcoming presidential elections. The slip contained one question: “Do you object to Dmitry Medvedev becoming the next president of the Russian Federation?” The voter was asked to select one of two options: “YES, I do not object” or “NO, I do not object.”

Indeed, during the campaign Russian towns were festooned with gigantic billboards showing Putin walking with Medvedev arm in arm under the slogan, “Together we will win.”

In statements about the need to fight corruption, President Medvedev has never mentioned the role of independent organizations, real political competition, or the media.

“Medvedev does set up specific deadlines for developing anti-corruption legislation, the forming of responsible commissions, and preparation of analytical reports. But the rhetoric that he uses is not new, and, like his predecessors, Medvedev looks set to resort to authoritarian methods for this purpose,” Kirill Kabanov, head of Russia’s Anti-Corruption Committee, said. “The biggest question is the team. Responsibility for combating corruption lies with the same bureaucrats who have been comfortable taking bribes.”

Troubled Elections

Recent election campaigns were marked by the massive use of what Russian experts call “administrative resource,” not just state privileges like cars, drivers and *dachas*(country cottages), but unlimited power to push decisions benefiting a narrow circle in the political elite and the ability to limitlessly brainwash the Russian people through nationwide television channels, all of which are now under state control.

While state executives are forbidden from endorsing any party during election campaigns in the media, public statements referring to a party could be seen as a passing reference, as long as the officials do not directly call for support of a specific party.

In 2002, Russia’s State Duma passed a measure, proposed by Yabloko, which stipulated that governors and other top-ranking officials who are placed on a political party list must take a break from their duties for the duration of an election campaign. The amendment sought to prevent the use of the government and state resources to support party aims.

But in 2006, the pro-Putin United Russia Party (*Yedinaya Rossiya*), which holds an overwhelming majority in the Russian Parliament, nullified the amendment. This move gave a green light to the *parovoz* (steam train) strategy, when regional governors are placed on the party list to pull in votes, like a railway engine pulling carriages and then retiring to a siding. Many critics believe this encourages political corruption.

St. Petersburg journalist Viktoria Rabotnova said the director of her daughter’s kindergarten told her that if the United Russia party performed badly in the December 2007 Duma elections, the school would suffer and its overstretched budget would not cover the mending of a leaking roof or installation of new windows.

“Naturally, they can’t check exactly who I vote for but they’re appealing to my mother’s instincts. Who on Earth would put their children at risk during the freezing Russian winter?” Viktoria asked.

Bogged Down in Bureaucracy

Officials say they are going to start fighting graft by improving legislation. Alexander Buksman, Russia’s first deputy prosecutor general, said first steps will introduce an obligatory anti-corruption review of all laws passed in the country and incorporate international anti-corruption

conventions, which have been ratified by Russia, into the country's laws.

Buksman said President Medvedev has urged the State Duma to develop and pass an anti-graft package by the end of 2008, adding that the very definition of "corruption" is still lacking in Russian law.

However, Medvedev's much-advertised crusade against graft appears to be little more than a public relations campaign.

Yury Vdovin, a co-chairman of the St. Petersburg-based human rights group Citizens' Watch (*Grazhdanskii Kontrol*), links Russia's rampant corruption, which he contends has increased steadily over the past 10 years, to the high and ever-increasing number of bureaucrats in the country. "There are 5 million state officials in Russia," he said, "or one official for every 28 people. With the arrival of the new anti-corruption body, there will simply be even more of them."

It is not that Russia does not have the right laws. In 1996, President Boris Yeltsin decreed that any media report alleging corruption by a state official must result in a prompt investigation supervised by top officials in the relevant ministry. This useful measure would surely help in the fight against corruption, if only it were not widely ignored.

Worse, Russian journalists are finding new reasons to be concerned. Under a series of new changes to Russian legislation, a mere stroke of the pen will brand any media report critical of the Kremlin as "public slander of state officials." Those responsible will be at risk of up to three years in prison.

A true, state-run anti-corruption organization must be transparent and accountable, not only to the head of state but to that country's citizens. A civil control mechanism must also exist, including accountability for officials, transparent contract processes, and clear-cut hiring policies. This mechanism should not include the appointment of governors and other executives, or fixed-term contracts for government executives. Otherwise, this campaign will degenerate into more infighting among the powerful.

Until corrupt officials are punished as robustly as common criminals, the talk about fighting corruption in Russia remains so much hot air.