

By Galina Stolyarova

The flyers glued to the entrances of the apartment buildings look, at first sight, unremarkable.

These leaflets pasted up in many Russian towns are advertising “draft-dodging” services. They provide a contact number for a shadow firm, holding out the promise that your teenage son can be spared the dreadful fate that would await him in the armed forces—for a hefty fee.

Hundreds of people see these leaflets every day, including, no doubt, law enforcement officers, but they stay up on the walls just the same. In St. Petersburg, the deal is a bargain at 68,000 roubles (US\$2,574) while in Moscow the price reaches 172,000 roubles (US\$6,436).

As reports of brutal hazing continue to come from every region of the country, many families are looking for an escape route from military service for their children.

The criminal market has responded accordingly. According to Georgy Satarov, director of the Indem Foundation, a Moscow-based anti-corruption watchdog, the cost of bribing your way out of military service has sky-rocketed. It now costs around 20 times more than in 2001, probably a higher rate of inflation than for any other service.

According to Indem, the level of bribes paid to officials by Russian businessmen has grown more than tenfold in the last five years. The average bribe in the commercial sector has increased from 611,384 to 6.5 million roubles (US\$22,900 to US\$243,750), the survey said.

Fifty-three percent of Russians polled by the nationwide agency VTSIOM said they have paid a bribe at least once in their lives. Nineteen percent of survey’s respondents admitted making corrupt payments on a regular basis. Sixty percent of respondents said corruption in Russia is ineradicable.

When it comes to planning a child's education and career, corruption begins very early in the process. As well as having to pay a sweetener of up to 27,000 roubles (US\$1000) to get a child into kindergarten, Russian parents may well have to fork out 53,396 to 533,960 roubles (US\$2,000 to US\$20,000) to obtain their child's university entrance.

Not even health care is immune from the cancer of under-the-counter payments. If you fall ill or need an operation, the cost of getting yourself into a well-equipped hospital can be 40,047 to 80,094 roubles (US\$1500 to US\$3000). And even in the public hospitals used by the poor, money talks.

I have seen penniless old people lying in corridors in Russian clinics, begging for food, and others occupying shabby beds dating from shortly after World War II, without bed linens and, in some cases, even without mattresses. It is an open secret that a backhander of 400 roubles (US\$15) per day will get a patient washed, fed and properly looked after.

Half of all bribes in Russia are paid to doctors, and more than 20 percent of Russians have reported not being able to get the treatment they needed because they could not afford the bribe, according to an Indem study.

While corruption scams are booming, the programs meant to combat graft and organized crime don't seem to be making much headway.

During the summer of 2006, in an attempt to fight the illegal alcohol market and protect people from widely distributed, but often poisonous bootleg liquor, the Russian government introduced a new system of labels for all imported wines and spirits. However, at the time when the clampdown was supposed to start, it turned out that not enough new excise labels had been printed for the genuine imported wines and spirits, and that it would take months to deliver them.

The reform thus clobbered many legal businesses, including wine boutiques, wholesale suppliers, and restaurants, because they were stuck with thousands of bottles lacking the correct new labels.

President Vladimir Putin has made some strong statements denouncing bribery and corruption. And in July 2006 he signed into law a bill ratifying the Council of Europe's Criminal Law Convention on Corruption.

But Putin's words must be weighed carefully against his actions – or the lack of them.

The government's promises to crack down on corruption have yet to be translated into a coherent policy. Despite ambitious declarations, corruption in Russia is rife. According to the Moscow-based National Anti-Corruption Committee, corruption costs Russia \$40 billion a year.

Worldwide perceptions of Russia's corruption problems, as tracked by Transparency International (TI), have slid from bad to worse. In TI's Corruption Perceptions Index, Russia plummeted from 71st place in 2002 to 126th in 2005, placing the country alongside Albania and Sierra Leone in the court of public opinion.

To combat corruption effectively, a country needs a free media, a parliament containing something resembling a robust and genuine opposition, and unbiased courts. In Russia, since Putin's rise to power, the integrity of each of these institutions has rapidly deteriorated.

All nationwide TV channels are now under state control. Pro-presidential bloc United Russia holds an overwhelming majority at the State Duma, and political opposition is small and fragmented. Civil society is unable to exert any significant degree of control over government. Not surprisingly, the media now plays little part in exposing or criticising corruption.

The Kremlin's most recent measures, aimed at increasing the authorities' control over elections and the political process, prevent political parties from joining together to form coalitions. Regional governors are no longer elected, but appointed by the president.

A new law on non-governmental organizations, which came into force in April 2006, has been widely seen as a crackdown on human rights groups. St. Petersburg civil society campaigner Yury Vdovin called the law a weapon with a telescopic sight, to be used selectively against the most critical groups. Vdovin said that, through a new registration process, it will place major bureaucratic obstacles in the way of the work and possibly the existence of human rights groups. The law also restricts foreign funding for these groups.

“For friends—everything. For enemies—the law.” This formula, invented by General Franco, provides a key to understanding Russia’s current anti-corruption strategy.

In July 2006, the General Prosecutor’s Office announced that corruption charges were being brought against two governors, Alexei Barinov of the Nenets Autonomous Region and Alexei Lebed of the Khakassia Republic.

The prosecutors maintain that Lebed twice travelled abroad at the expense of two local universities, and Barinov misused hundreds of thousands of dollars of state money. On the surface, these cases look like good examples of an anti-corruption campaign in action.

But with investigations still in progress, there are some disturbing aspects. Both regions boast substantial oil and gas resources. And both governors have recently tried to assert their independence.

On May 14, Sergei Mironov, speaker of the Council of Federation called for the dismissal of four legislators, on the grounds of allegations that they were they were involved in outside commercial deals. Two of the deputies represented Nenets Region and Khakassia, and Barinov and Lebed resisted the pressure from the Kremlin to support of sacking the MPs.

Justice in Russia is highly selective. As one democrat politician puts it, “In Russia the law is used like a club. The law should be equal for everyone, while a club is used only against a chosen target.”

The oil magnate, Mikhail Khodorkovsky, had the misfortune of becoming one such chosen target. His former company, Yukos, was declared bankrupt in July 2006 after being hit by a huge claim from the tax authorities for 734 billion roubles (US\$27.5 billion). Mikhail Khodorkovsky was sentenced in 2005 to eight years in prison for fraud and tax evasion.

Many believe he brought the disaster onto himself by breaking Putin's unwritten rule of politics, that oligarchs maybe be super-rich and influential, as long as they don't mess with politics. Khodorkovsky, possibly with presidential ambitions, had openly funded political opposition and a critical TV channel.

One of Khodorkovsky's lawyers claimed that Saddam Hussein was being treated more fairly than his client.

"When Saddam's lawyers asked for an additional three months for him to familiarize himself with the case materials, they got a month and a half, but Khodorkovsky wasn't granted a single hour of the eight weeks he requested," said the lawyer, Yury Schmidt. "Instead of being sent to a prison in Moscow or in a neighboring region, Khodorkovsky was sent to a jail that is 7,000 km away from Moscow, which you can only reach by a six-hour flight and another half-day drive by car along a bumpy road."

In the world of media, pressure on journalists and attempted bribery is commonplace. One editor in St. Petersburg uses a trick to signal to readers when the contents of an article have been paid for by City Hall

He gives such articles a fictitious by-line, perhaps an anagram of the name of St. Petersburg governor Valentina Matvienko, or a name containing a reference to Smolny, the headquarters of the St. Petersburg City Hall.

An aide to an opposition parliamentarian in one Russian town admitted having a monthly "media allowance budget" that regularly buys his boss a quote, an interview or a feature in the local print media. The deputy has to pay to let readers know about his criticisms of the city government, but in this case the bribe is, ironically, helping one limited aspect of the democratic process to work.