In Russia, Corruption Plagues the Higher-Education System

From the top down, the country's universities are impoverished by bribery and insider deals large and small

By ANNA NEMTSOVA

Moscow

In a dim, stuffy room at Nizhniy Novgorod State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering, Svetlana, a second-year student, hangs her wet clothes on a string between two bunk beds. She shares the space with eight roommates.

Crammed conditions are common in Russian dormitories. But just three feet outside Svetlana's window, a block of new, upscale apartments adds insult to injury. Students call the building "the president's dorm" because it will soon be occupied by the university president, Yevgeny Koposov, and other top administrators.

"I bet the living conditions the president is providing for himself are going to be a little better than what we have here," says Svetlana, who did not want her last name published for fear of angering the administration.

"All our school managers care for is their own enrichment," she says, angrily pointing at the nine-story building, which blocks the sunlight into her room.

The president's dorm at Nizhniy Novgorod, a university situated on the Volga River east of Moscow, is but one example of what anticorruption watchdogs say is widespread mismanagement and in some cases outright corruption throughout the country's higher-education system.

Presidents use their positions to create fiefdoms on campus, doling out perks to themselves and their allies. Admissions officials demand bribes to enroll otherwise-qualified students, and professors expect money from students in exchange for passing grades. The black-market pipeline of money and perks thrives even as the system itself is eroding. Professors are underpaid, textbooks are of poor quality, and buildings are in dire need of repair. Last year 10 students died in a fire in a Moscow classroom building. The private institution, short of money, had rented the building's lower three floors as office space, which blocked the fire exits.

Many Families Affected

A poll last year by Transparency International, an anticorruption group, found that 66 percent of Russians consider the higher-education system to be corrupt, says Elena A. Panfilova, director of the institute's office in Russia. Another survey by the group showed 19 percent of wealthy Russians, 14 percent of middle-class Russians, and 11 percent of poor Russians said they had paid bribes to admissions officials and professors to gain admission and passing grades.
Families can spend 30 to 40 percent of their incomes on bribes for what is supposed to be a free education, says Yefim Galitsky, director of the Economy and Education project at the Moscow Higher School of Economy. The project surveys Russians, both rural and urban, about their opinions on education and other issues. In Moscow each year, some 30 to 40 professors are caught accepting bribes in exchange for grades, according to figures from the Russian Parliament.

While such lower-level bribery gets the most public attention in Russia, Mr. Galitsky said that higher-level abuses can have wider impacts.

"University presidents often privatize their power, their authority to make money, both for the school and for themselves," he says, noting that that is more likely to occur in outlying provinces because campuses are far away from Moscow regulators.

Real-estate deals have proved to be major moneymakers for senior administrators, says Kirill Kabanov, chairman of the National Anti-Corruption Committee, a nongovernmental organization.

In Moscow and St. Petersburg, several university rectors were allegedly in the business of selling permits to build private facilities on university properties. They were able to use their positions to obtain the permits from city authorities, said Mr. Kabanov, whose organization learned of the deals through professors. He said his group informed federal prosecutors but never heard back from them.

His committee is investigating complaints of other financial abuses, including instances of officials' renting campus space to private businesses for use as offices, restaurants, and steam baths.

In the Krasnodar region, in the south of Russia, two university presidents resigned last year after they were accused by students of taking bribes, Mr. Kabanov said.

Just recently a criminal investigation began at the Krasnodar State University of Culture and Art. Employees paid in advance for apartments in a block of renovated housing being developed on the campus. Administrators took the money, but the employees were denied the housing, said Ilya Shakalov, the university press officer.

While many Russians seem to take these instances of corruption in stride, sometimes they fight back.

Last year students in the sociology department at Moscow State University, one of Russia's most prestigious, asked Parliament for help in their struggle against what they said were outrageously high prices at their campus cafeteria, which belonged to the dean's son. The appeal worked: The cafe was closed in March. A new one, not affiliated with the dean, opened about a month later.

In Siberia, students at Novosibirsk State Medical Academy demonstrated last December because, they said, professors were forcing them to pay money to pass exams. The protestors wore gauze medical masks to conceal their
identities and chanted "Students against corruption" and "Administration, stop the illegal private business."

Parliament's Anti-Corruption Committee has begun looking into various cases.

No matter what the investigations uncover about specific instances of corruption, clearly "the problem of mismanagement, presidents behaving like little dictators and overestimating their powers exists in Russian universities," says Gennady Gudkov, head of the parliamentary committee.

A survey by his committee estimates that corruption in higher education is costing the system one billion dollars per year.

A Change in Leadership

Founded in 1930, Nizhniy Novgorod State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering enrolls 10,000 students and offers technical training, architecture and urban planning, and construction and environmental engineering degrees.

Mr. Koposov, the president, was a geology professor and vice chairman of the department of industrial science. In 2004 he became vice president for development. Two years later, he was elected president after his predecessor died.

The Chronicle made several attempts to reach him and other senior administrators at the university. In a written response, the university press office said that only Mr. Koposov could speak for the university, but that he was too busy to answer questions.

Reached by telephone, Mr. Koposov said: "I do not have time to answer journalists' questions."

The university's annual budget is 550 million rubles, or about $22.3-million; $7.3-million of that comes from the state. The rest, according to the university's Web site, comes mostly from tuition.

The university has been struggling for almost a decade with budget shortfalls and poor living conditions for students.

Like many Russian universities, it was hit hard during the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The higher-education system as a whole saw its budget decline drastically during that period.

In recent years, the government has reversed that decline, so that support is roughly the same as it was before perestroika. Last year the national higher-education budget was $9.2-billion, or 226.5 billion rubles, compared with $4.9-billion, or 120.5 billion rubles, in 2005.

Yet that windfall has yet to significantly change the economic straits many universities find themselves in.
"Most universities are still in poor condition, recovering from 10 years of economic crises," says Natalia Kovaleva, director of the Center for Statistics and Monitoring of Education at the Moscow Higher School of Economy. "Salaries remain low, building maintenance continues to be deferred, and libraries need to be renewed. Unfortunately, the more money is being poured into the system, the more money is being stolen."

Nizhniy Novgorod's poverty is evident across the campus. The wallpaper is peeling in some classrooms, department heads say they spend their own money to buy classroom materials and publish textbooks, and everyone complains about the primitive equipment.

The bottom three floors of Svetlana's five-floor dormitory consist of old classrooms full of paper files. Despite the fire hazard, only one door on every floor opens to the staircase. The others have locks on them and little paper signs saying "Obtain the Key From the Janitor on the Ground Floor."

"Students jumping out of windows in the Moscow institute did not teach our management much," complains Sergei, 20, a student, referring to the fire in Moscow last October.

Indifference to Academics?

An indifference to building safety is mirrored in Nizhniy Novgorod's lack of attention to academic issues, says Lev Zelenov, who leads the philosophy department and has been a professor there since 1969.

"My biggest concern is that I've been seeing the scientific and learning process degrade under this new management," he says. "They spend most of their energy and effort on their personal commercial projects. The president and his deputies forget about science."

Professors' pay averages $300 to $500 a month. Mr. Zelenov makes slightly more than $800 a month, but only because he is entitled to extra money for the scientific honors he has won. He says he spends up to $1,000 of his own money every year publishing graduate dissertations and his own articles. In Soviet times, universities would provide money for such publications, but the university has cut that budget to nearly nothing.

Mr. Zelenov is particularly concerned about the closure last November of the university's eight dissertation councils, which had met regularly to decide whether to issue advanced degrees to students. Students have been forced to go to other universities to defend their dissertations.

Although he has written letters of concern to the administration, he says he has yet to receive an explanation of why the councils were disbanded, only that this is a new university policy.

"We might lose the status of the university, which we got less than a decade ago," he says.
Mr. Zelenov was the only professor who would complain on the record; other faculty members said they feared losing their jobs. Over the past year and a half, Mr. Koposov has fired four of his predecessor's deputies and two directors of institutes. He has also closed down the Institute of Economy and Law, fired part of its staff, and incorporated those who remained into the Distance Education Institute, downgrading their status.

Mr. Koposov never publicly ? or privately ? explained his actions to those involved, professors say.

"We live in the atmosphere of persecutions and threats," said a department chair, who asked not to be named.

Meanwhile the administration spent $25,000 to build a 215-square-foot private bathroom at the back of the president's office, according to a former university administrator, who was fired by the current administration and did not want to be identified.

The contractors did a good job: The spacious restroom juts into the central building's hallway. It has a shower, some gym equipment, and a bed.

Professors also say the president has hired relatives to fill management jobs at the university. His son, for example, is head of Industry Security, a commercial group based on the campus that provides inspections and registration paperwork to industrial companies.

Certainly problems of bribery and graft in Russia are not unique to higher education. The country's vice prime minister, Dmitri Medvedev, who is a presidential candidate, has called Russia "a country of legal nihilism" and said that "corruption has assumed an enormous scope today."

But anticorruption watchdogs say the problems in higher education could set a pattern for years to come.

"By accepting corruption and making it a norm of everyday life," says Mr. Kabanov, of the anticorruption group, "universities produce generation after generation of corrupt professionals."

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