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Everyday Corruption in Kazakhstan: An Ethnographic Analysis of Informal Practices

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ABSTRACT The struggle against corruption in Kazakhstan is a serious challenge facing the government and society at large, as it is in many transition economy countries. The gravity of corruption in this Central Asian republic is revealed by the fact that informal practices of circumventing official procedures such as bribery and the use of connections have so widely and strongly permeated into the life of common people that they have de facto become social norms. Based on fieldwork in Almaty, this paper analyzes the basic features of everyday corruption in Kazakhstan, and examines the mechanisms and background against which corruption is reproduced. The paper also discusses the impact that the transformation from a socialist economy to a market economy has had on corruption, and the ways in which informal networks are being used to find a way around official rules changed from the Soviet era.

KEYWORDS Everyday corruption, institutionalized corruption, informal practices, privatization, Kazakhstan

The Central Asian state of Kazakhstan survived the chaos that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 to successfully maintain social stability on the whole as it increasingly makes its presence felt on the international stage. However, while the country is experiencing remarkable economic development by utilizing its bountiful resources, corruption—particularly in the form of systemic bribery—is spreading to all fields and is having grave effects politically, economically, and socially.

This study focuses on corruption at the level experienced by the average person. The study unveils the reality of the situation as it investigates the mechanisms and

background against which corruption is reproduced while showing what has changed and what has remained unchanged from the Soviet era. As an interim report from the first year of the research project "Exploring Informal Networks in Kazakhstan: A Multidimensional Approach" (2012–2014) conducted at the Institute of Developing Economies, Japan External Trade Organization, I am working here to analyze the basic features of everyday corruption in Kazakhstan based on the methodology I will set out below to set me on course toward my final results.

Methodology

The interest of international institutions such as the World Bank in corruption increased in the 1990s immediately after the end of the Cold War. Eliminating corruption now occupies an important place on the political agenda of international society. International institutions and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have actively carried out various studies (the best known being the Corruption Perceptions Index created by Transparency International), focusing on corporations, individuals, and specialists, with the goals of encouraging governments around the world to improve governance and of providing them with policy recommendations for institutional reform. Economic analyses that use the results of these investigations now account for the mainstream of corruption research. These investigations and studies have been premised by the notion that corruption can be defined universally and can be measured quantitatively (Ledeneva 2009, Krastev 2004).

Scholars from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology have been critical of this corruption paradigm, however. Their criticisms are mainly leveled at the quantification of a complex subject like corruption, the validity of indiscriminately comparing different countries, and the axiomatic creation of distinctions between public and private that is the premise of the definition that international institutions use, namely that corruption is "the abuse of public office for private gain." In contrast to the economic approach that currently holds the central ground, anthropologists argue the need for focusing on the cultural and historical background to corruption and the local context that such background creates. They call for concretely conceptualizing and analyzing the practices and discourse of corruption rooted in people's lives (Haller and Shore 2005, Blundo 2006, Smith 2007).

Based likewise on such an approach, the present study's objective is to qualitatively assess and analyze corruption in Kazakhstan. I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews in Russian with 60 people mainly in Almaty but also in

Astana and the Almaty suburb of Esik. To select my interview subjects, I did snowball sampling of acquaintances and people they introduced to me and also received assistance from local specialists in social research. The interview subjects included both male and female Kazakhs and Russians ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s and who came from diverse occupational backgrounds.

In the interviews, I asked mainly about corruption that the interviewees or their family, friends, and acquaintances had actually experienced in their daily lives or at work. For individuals with more detailed knowledge about corruption due to working in such professions as the law or journalism, I asked more for their views as specialists in their respective fields rather than accounts of personal experiences. I also asked those subjects in their 30s or older who remembered Soviet times about commonalities and differences between those days and post-independence times, as well as about whatever changes had taken place in the 20 years since independence. I further focused in these interviews on what kinds of behaviors the interview subjects themselves regarded as "corruption."

In the interviews I conducted locally, I asked in Russian about "*korrupsiia*" ("corruption" in English). In this study, rather than defining corruption in advance and then conducting my research based on that premise, I sought instead to collect the stories people had to tell about *korrupsiia*. I did so because I thought that knowing what the people of Kazakhstan themselves thought (or did not think) constituted corruption and how they viewed it was more important than identifying what was and was not corruption based on interview data or through collecting only those examples that conformed with some definition a researcher had setup in advance.¹

The sociologist Alena Ledeneva is known for her ethnographic studies on corruption in Russia. In her interviews with average persons, representatives of the elite, and those with relevant know-how regarding the post-Soviet economy, Ledeneva (1998, 2006) has analyzed the informal practices that have underpinned politics and economics in the Soviet Union and present-day Russia. Her work has shown that these practices compensate for failings in the official institutions and make the social system function even as they simultaneously undermine it. Much of the information in Ledeneva's research also applies to Kazakhstan, which is intimately connected historically and culturally to Russia and has followed the same trajectory of the shift to market economy in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. I also want to focus in this

¹ The main languages of Kazakhstan are Kazakh and Russian, but in Almaty, the site of my research, Russian is still the dominant tongue even today, 20 years after independence.

study on the ways in which the Russian case is different from Kazakhstan's, which has such "Asian" elements as a culture of gift-giving and strong kinship networks.

Previous research on corruption in Kazakhstan has concentrated on questionnaire data obtained from individuals and corporations. Kazakhstan's government has, under the long rule of President Nursultan Nazarbaev, been authoritarian in nature. While it cannot be readily said that free speech is being adequately protected, the president and his government have themselves called for the elimination of corruption, with the result that research into and news coverage of corruption has been active after a fashion. According to Abdykarimov et al. (2011), 10 statistical social research projects were carried out between 2008 and 2010, including surveys that the government's Agency for Civil Service Affairs commissioned from research institutions. However, many of these projects, such as those ranking corruption in government institutions, reflected the interests of the people who handle policy; with a few exceptions, they are not practically suited for getting a grasp on the state of corruption.

If these projects and the commentary by Kazakhstan scholars on corruption elimination policies are set aside, then we see that the research on corruption in post-Soviet Kazakhstan is scant. The few previous studies on the topic that can be cited include those by Rigi (2004), who described the corruption and the chaotic situation during the mid-1990s, and Werner (2000), who pointed out the difficulty of precisely distinguishing between "bribes" and "gifts" as well as the existence of rules for receiving bribes. Some research does exist that focuses on specific areas, such as corruption in education (e.g., Heyneman 2007, Osipian 2009). The present study, however, does not focus on a particular area. Instead, I collected a broad range of examples of corruption that Kazakhstan's people encounter in their daily lives and in the course of their work. I did so because I believe that everyday corruption in Kazakhstan contains structures that are shared across all areas and that they can be understood them by looking cross-sectionally at a variety of examples.

The spread of everyday corruption

Before I discuss the features of everyday corruption in Kazakhstan, I want first to cite some data that illustrates its breadth (Table 1). The data here are the results of a questionnaire from a Kazakhstani think tank that asked individuals and organizations who had interactions with public institutions over the preceding 18 months about "informal services" (seeking to unlawfully gain benefits from public institutions through payoffs or intercession). The survey was conducted across Kazakhstan (in

Astana, Almaty, and the capitals of the country's fourteen *oblats* or provinces), with a sample size of 5,760 (17% of which were organizations). There are no specific indications of when the survey was conducted, but judging from the year of publication it would appear to have been 2006 or 2007.

As we see from these survey results, it is hardly unusual in Kazakhstan to resolve problems informally. What's more, because using bribes and personal connections is a delicate issue, at times a person might deny having done so if asked despite actually having resorted to such methods. When considering the possibility of underdeclaring informal practices in this light, it is possible that the realities of corruption in public institutions are even more grave than this.

The entries listed under "nature of the violation" require some explanation. First, education and day care (state universities, 4th place; nurseries, 5th place; organs of education, 17th place; and schools, 27th place) are issues that directly confront many households with children. Just like Japan, the framework for public nursery schools in Kazakhstan is inadequate; not infrequently, parents may have to wait several years after applying to enroll their child. This is why, as often as not, the parents must grease the palms of the government official in charge or the nursery school principal to get their child into the school.

Kazakhstan's public universities are fee-based just like the private universities, and tuition tends to be higher the better known the institution is. Per-class tuition fees also differ between departments; in Almaty, the costs are said to run from US\$2,000 to \$10,000 per year, an extreme burden for the average family. However, if prospective students get good results on the Common National Examination (Edinnoe Natsional'noe Testirovanie, ENT), they can get a government scholarship, meaning their tuition is de facto remitted. This is why the entry for "marks on the ENT" appears in Table 1. There are also scholarships determined at the discretion of the universities, such as those for graduate students.

Hospitals (23rd place) are also an institution closely related to everyday life. State-run hospitals and clinics are, in principle, free of charge, but not infrequently patients are called upon to cover the costs for examinations and medicines. It is also not unusual for doctors to openly ask for money before surgery, and patients themselves will frequently give honoraria, particularly for handling births and the like.

Connections and bribes are also often used at military registration and enlistment offices (*voenkomat*, 31st place) that handle the conscription of soldiers. Parents worried about army treatment and the hazing of new recruits will scheme to somehow

have their sons avoid conscription. However, the opposite holds true in rural areas where unemployment is severe; there, one finds parents who pay bribes—though in amounts vastly smaller than those paid to avoid conscription—to get their sons into the army. Certificates of military service (*voennyi билет*, literally "military tickets") are issued to those who have fulfilled their obligation; however, in recent years some youths have attempted to obtain them illegally because those seeking employment with government institutions are obliged to present such documents.

Why is that people choose informal methods? The reasons and background to this are varied, but they can be broken down broadly into (1) blackmail, (2) tacit consent of and abetting lawbreaking, and (3) improved services. The first category corresponds, for example, to the road police who may seek a bribe by falsely accusing someone of a traffic violation or claiming that an auto is defective and then purposely failing its auto inspection. The second category pertains to getting something that is not supposed to be obtainable with money, such as getting a better grade on an exam, or to avoiding a punishment, such as having a criminal offense covered up. Even with bribe-giving, depending on the case someone may suffer from the corruptive practice or, on the contrary, take advantage of it: contrast case (1) where the person being asked for a bribe is the victim of corruption with cases (2) and (3) where the bribe giver also obtains some benefit from giving it.

The boundaries between the cases are in fact vague. Let us continue with the example of the road police to consider this. If a driver breaks the speed limit, the reason for the bribe is not blackmail (1) by the police officer but rather winning tacit acceptance for lawbreaking (2); however, there are instances in which it is not clear whether or not there is some failing on the part of the one who wanted the palm greased. When it comes to traffic violations, it is difficult for the driver to prove his or her own innocence given arbitrary enforcement by the police. Of course, there is also the method of just paying the official fine, but the people who choose that approach are in the minority since doing so would cost more than the bribe and it involves time and effort.

In contrast, while the services received in case (3) are themselves not illegal, it entails the expectation of getting better treatment due to a bribe. Tipping the doctor at a state-run hospital is an example that is easily understood. Frequently, money is handed over to get various procedures handled more quickly. Normally, the lines at service counters are long and people have to make repeated visits or are sent around from one counter to another. Bribes are frequently used to avoid these inconveniences. Also,

many people are firmly of the belief that the procedures are intentionally made complicated for the aim of getting bribes. Some also believe that one should be able to legally receive speedy service by, for example, setting extra charges.

Thus, the distinction between "extortion" and "spontaneity" in the receiving of a bribe is vague in everyday corruption; it cannot simply be said that average people are the victims and civil servants are the wrongdoers who misuse their official power. Furthermore, Kazakhstan has a relatively small population (16.87 million as of October 2012) and a society that emphasizes personal contacts in all respects including blood relationships, regional communities, alumni connections, and so forth. The average man on the street frequently knows someone among their kin and friends who has taken a position with the government, and it is extremely common for people to use those personal contacts to resolve problems informally. Even people who are indignant about corruption in the police, the Customs Office, or in government institutions will, when necessary, call upon their connections with kin or acquaintances who work at those institutions.

Table 1: Informal services in state institutions

Rank	State institution	%	Nature of the violation
1	Road police	55	Tacit acceptance of traffic violations, issuance of driver's license, vehicle registration, passing automobile inspection
2	Customs	46	Easing of customs procedures, tacit acceptance of transporting illegal goods
3	Sanitary and epidemiological station	41	Favorable inspection results, issuance of certificates
4	State universities	40	Provide structure of state expenses (free), pass class exams, change major
5	Nurseries	40	Enrollment in nursery school, day care outside of hours
6	Architecture	39	Construction and extension/rebuilding permits, issuance of certificates
7	Land registration	37	Registration of land, privatization, issuance of certificates
8	Criminal-executive system	36	Parole for prisoners, amnesty, mitigation of punishment, permission to receive visitors and baggage
9	Financial police	35	Tacit acceptance of violations such as bribery
10	Frontier guard	33	Tacit acceptance of illegal departures and entries
11	Migration police	32	Residence registrations, work permits
12	Courts	31	Favorable rulings
13	Rail transport	31	Preparation of tickets for specific dates, boarding of trains without tickets, reservations of trains and sidetracks
14	Military registration and enlistment office	31	Issuance of certificates of military service, exemption from conscription, physician's certificate of being unfit for military service, rank of soldier, service in specific unit or city, enlistment permit
15	Real estate registration	30	Real estate registration, issuance of certificates
16	Police	29	Cover-up of criminal case
17	Organs of education	27	Enrollment in nursery school, marks on the ENT, guardianship procedures
18	Fire-fighting service	26	Issuance of fire control certification documents, reduction of fines for fires and violations

19	Organs of justice	25	Various document procedures, registration of companies, permits, document certifications, mediation related to criminal cases
20	Tax inspection	25	Tacit consent for violations
21	Office of public prosecutor	23	Administrative complaints with respect to state institutions, mediation with the courts, changes to jail terms, patronage of business, removal of competitors
22	Environment department	23	Game poaching, fish poaching, tacit acceptance of illegal harvesting, exemption from fines, permits for business activities
23	State hospitals	22	Fees for surgery, bearing own expenses for examination costs and medicine charges, issuing of doctor's certificates
24	Telecommunication	22	Telephone line installation, line repairs
25	Municipality	21	Acquisition of privileged housing and lands, priority for residence in housing built with public support, acquisition of burial plots, business startup
26	Passport bureau	20	Issuance of identification card, residence permit (<i>propiska</i>)
27	Schools	19	Enrollment in specific school, results on diploma

SOURCE: Turisbekov et al. (2007: 40-41).

(1) Items ranked from 28 to 34 have been abridged. The explanations under "nature of the violation" in the source text were supplemented when necessary or omitted when redundant. In particular, the column on the Financial Police was blank in the table that was cited. There is overlap between "real estate" and "land," but the entries have been left as is.

(2) Regarding the figures (percentages) presented here, it would appear that the users of each institution (160 to 170 people and corporations) represent the modulus and the figure itself indicates how many of those people received an informal service.

Institutionalized corruption

Simple avarice on the part of civil servants, police officers, physicians, and educators is not the root cause for the spread of corruption. Corruption has been systematized, and it is in fact difficult in a system where the structures that reproduce this have been created for individual constituent members to oppose it. In this regard, legal expert Sergei Utkin, for example, has stressed that corruption is a problem not of individual cases of justice but rather of the entire judicial system. "Let's say there is a judge who says he is going to work honestly without taking any bribes. The system will not permit this. If such a judge existed, the other judges would wind up appearing to be scoundrels. The chief justice, too, would not need a judge who would not carry out his orders. In Kazakhstan, we frequently see people who, working through intermediaries, will give money to the chief justice rather than a lower judge and then, after receiving it, the chief justice gives orders to the subordinate judges. The subordinate cannot go against the chief justice, who holds the power of appointment over him. When this happens over and over, a person gets tainted by the system."

One can point to the system of bribe sharing that occurs horizontally and vertically within institutions as well as the existence of a "market" as those elements that underpin corruption taking place constantly and systemically. When personnel at a state institution receive a bribe, in many cases they split it with their colleagues and at the same time give some as tribute to their superiors. Their superiors take their share and then pass the remainder on to the executives above them. These splits and tributes make it difficult to blow the whistle within an organization; they are also the reason why superiors tacitly consent to and encourage their subordinates to take bribes. Corruption is reproduced systemically by this pyramid-shaped structure.

The purchasing of jobs and status can be called the foundation of this tributary system. Generally, since the amount needed to get a job corresponds to several months' pay, the psychology that operates is that once the person gets it they themselves will take bribes to try to recoup their "initial investment." Furthermore, even after they are employed, they must regularly pay "honoraria." On the other hand, if some sort of accident takes place such as the superior who functions as their patron (*krysha*, "roof") loses his or her job, there is always the risk of that person losing their own post, making their investment useless. For that reason, the person who gets a job through bribery will try to quickly get back the money they spent while they have that job.

Let me offer as a concrete example a story of a former Customs official who I will call "Nurlan" (all personal names introduced in quotes in this article are pseudonyms).

In the mid-2000s, Nurlan paid US\$4,000 through his father-in-law—himself a Customs official—to get his job. Incidentally, this example of buying government employment have been confirmed even in official announcements. For example, former Customs Control Committee chairperson Serik Baimaganbetov, who was indicted in February 2012 for bribery, received US\$80,000 in exchange for giving jobs at regional customs offices.² Nurlan worked at a customs post along the country's border with Kyrgyzstan. According to him, the market rate for bribes was 10% of the appraised value of the shipment being brought into Kazakhstan. The monthly salary for the average office worker is 42,000 *tenge* (approximately US\$280 as of December 2012 exchange rates), but there was "supplemental income" of US\$200 on average in a single shift (this is take-home pay aside from the "necessary expenses" to be discussed below). With a working pattern of being on for a day and a night followed by two days off, this supplemental income amounted to roughly US\$2,000 per month, or about seven times the official salary. The shifts at the customs office comprised one manager and eight staff persons, with the manager receiving a cut twice that of the average staff member. Each team would pay tribute of US\$500 to their superior per shift. This was standardized regardless of how "hard-earned" it was. In addition, some would also be distributed even to the local public prosecutors' office as well as the local outposts of the Agency on Fighting with Economic and Corruption Crimes (Financial Police) and the Committee on National Security. According to Nurlan, the amounts would sometimes change: "For example, let's say someone from the Committee on National Security comes. You might say 'we didn't collect all that much today, so if US\$200 is OK, here you are' and they would take it. Next, the Financial Police might come to say, 'We've got no gasoline,' but when we reply, 'Well, how about US\$200?' they would say no, it has to be US\$500 and threaten to not let any trucks pass or else. So you have no choice but to pay US\$500. That's because if you don't, the next day they will lie in wait and arrest people who are bringing in a shipment of contraband. In place of money, you might also treat someone to meals at a restaurant or invite them to a sauna."

In addition, one aspect of the background for bribe taking in state institutions that takes place regularly is the inadequate social services offered and the fact that employees must cover their own expenses. Since there was nowhere to have meals, Nurlan and his co-workers pooled their money to rent an apartment and hire a cook, turning it into their cafeteria. Furthermore, staff had to cover, out of pocket, everything

² "Finpolitsiia oznakomit eks-glavu KTK MFRK s materialami ugolovnogo dela," www.zakon.kz, 2012/06/19.

from the gasoline without which they could not do their jobs to entertaining officials and parliamentarians who came on inspection trips. Also, according to a former Internal Affairs Ministry officer I interviewed, his former subordinates bought their police uniforms with their own money. These injustices are also submitted to precisely because there is supplemental income.

Determinants of prices

How much money does someone pay whatever the case may be? The average person has a general sense of the market rate based on their own experiences and those of their kinfolk and acquaintances. For example, getting enrolled at a nursery runs to US\$300, enrollment at school \$500, and evading conscription from US\$1,500 to US\$2,000.³ The existence of such market rates can be regarded, along with the aforementioned tributary system, as proof that bribery occurs constantly and systemically.

However, the "market rate" is at best a rough estimate; the amount that is actually played will be governed by various factors, including the economic circumstances of the person paying and the social status and personal relationships among those making requests, any intermediaries, and the recipients. Generally, even if the proposal is the same, the higher the income of the person making the bribe, the higher the bribe given will be. Furthermore, the market rate itself tends to rise each year with inflation.

Six years ago, a man in his 40s named "Kanat" was arrested by the road police for driving home drunk from a friend's birthday party. If he did nothing, then he would have received administrative punishment, forfeiting his driver's license. Accordingly, Kanat passed a bribe along through a friend to the judge and managed to avoid any problems. "I paid around US\$1,000, I believe. That was high at the time, but now (2011) it's normal. I don't know how my acquaintance negotiated with whoever. I don't need to know, either." When I asked how the figure of US\$1,000 was determined, Kanat said it was *taksa*—the market rate. The amount differs depending on the severity of the offense—speeding, driving under the influence, an accident causing injury or death, and so forth. Kanat said it was "just like buying goods at a store. Even with something like sugar you can have one choice that's high-end and another that isn't, right?" In Kanat's case, he had been away from home on business and as much as two weeks passed after the incident before he consulted with his acquaintance. He was told by his acquaintance who played the mediator that had Kanat himself called before the

³ As for the bribe for enrolling in a nursery or school, it is also not infrequently paid in kind, such as by purchasing classroom equipment or through the mending of facilities.

paperwork was sent to the judge, it could have been dealt with internally by the police for much less money. Incidentally, that friend did not take a commission; all US\$1,000 went into the hands of the judge.

Let's take another example. "Daniyar" is a man in his 20s who avoided conscription with a bribe. Originally from southern Kazakhstan, Daniyar was called up for service after he returned to Kazakhstan after obtaining his bachelor's and master's degrees in a foreign country. He did not want to enter the military. His mother was also worried, and she busied herself looking around for some course of action. "I have an uncle who works at a local hospital especially for civil servants, and he said he would talk to someone with the authority to make decisions in such matters. I paid around 500 euros. In my case, my name was already on the conscription list, so he had to get in touch with the head honcho. I don't know that person's name, but he was on the committee that decides who will be conscripted. It might still have been managed somehow even without my uncle's connections, but if I had done that I would have had to go ask twice a year and paid a gratuity each time. Anyway, I was able to get it dealt with in one go. The amount might have been 1,000 euros if I hadn't gone through a relative. Aside from that, the ability of the person paying the money is also considered. I had just started working, but if I had been in a management position he likely would have asked for more."

As the examples of Kanat, Daniyar, and ex-Customs official Nurlan show, access to someone with authority is the key to infallibly achieving the objective. In this case, it is the intermediary who plays an important role. However much bribery is conducted on a daily basis, there is no changing the fact that officially it is an act that can be charged as a crime, and naturally there is a risk in accepting money directly from someone you do not know. Particularly in cases where money changes hands at the initiative of the giver, it is normal for a third party to be a go-between and maintain the anonymity of the person who is doing the receiving. Also, given the very nature of bribery, a relationship of trust with the intermediary is indispensable since the bribe giver cannot take any steps legally even in cases where the hoped-for results are not obtained or the intermediary intercepts the bribe.

Furthermore, in the cases presented here the intermediaries gave their help without compensation, but it is not uncommon for even a relative or friend acting as such to take a commission. There are also cases where what changes hands is not just money; it may also take the form of entertainment at a restaurant or some high-priced present. "Aliia," a single mother with four children, wanted to get a position for one of her sons

with the city of Almaty, and spoke with two of her friends "in order to compare prices." One friend, "A," was in fact herself a civil servant; A said she could act as a go-between to get the son a job with a monthly salary of 20,000 tenge (approx. US\$133) for a bribe of US\$1,000. The other friend, "B," was not a civil servant; B asked for 100,000 tenge (approx. US\$667) to get a position with a monthly salary of 15,000 to 20,000 tenge. Aliia said that A would not take a commission, while B would save some for herself. Even so, the reason why the offer from A was higher was because there was a better chance than with B of actually getting a job due to the fact that the person to whom A would be handing over the bribe was one of her co-workers. However, Aliia in the end did not use these connections because she decided that there was no 100 percent guarantee even with A's intercession, to say nothing of B, and given that the salary was too low it wasn't worth asking relatives to scrape together the money.

Of the various networks that can be seen in Kazakhstan society, the firmest ones can be said to be those relationships grounded in kinship ties. Connections among relatives are stronger, by far, for Asian peoples like the Kazakhs than they are for so-called European people like the Russians. The expression "a Kazakh has many relatives" is used at times by Kazakhs themselves to indicate the difficulties of socializing with relatives; aunts, uncles, cousins, siblings-in-law as well as nephews and nieces are tantamount to family and assisting such kin is regarded as a duty. The strength of these kinship networks works to the benefit of the Kazakhs in a country where people are called upon to use personal contacts to resolve various problems.

Many of the non-Kazakhs interviewed for this study thought that money was the most important thing for informal problem-solving and did not regard ethnic affiliations as a decisive factor. However, regardless of whether one is a Kazakh or a non-Kazakh, when it comes to using connections nearly everyone responded that being a Kazakh was an advantage.

The chaotic 1990s

"Insomuch as corruption does not spread farther than this, it will run rampant in all areas." "I cannot imagine a situation where there is no corruption in this country." I often heard such things from the people of Almaty I interviewed. When asking people in their 30s or older who remembered Soviet times about the spread of corruption and what had changed compared to those days, they responded almost unanimously that "it has become much worse." There was corruption in those days, too, but if it was

discovered it would be severely punished and, to begin with, people feared the Communist Party. In terms of fees for mediation, too, in the past it would go as far as champagne or chocolate, but now there is nobody who would be satisfied with such things. The typical response is that bribes are needed no matter what you do, and in fact they have become a matter of course.

The factor that the people regard as decisive in the worsening of corruption since the collapse of the Soviet Union is the privatization that occurred in the 1990s. Vitalii Voronov, a lawyer and chairman of the board for Transparency Kazakhstan, emphasized in an interview with me that "The corruption of Soviet times worsened with the advance of privatization. That is to say, privatization promoted the spread of corruption, not the other way around." The standard theory is that the privatization that reduces state intervention is an effective means to eradicate corruption. However, in the case of the former Soviet states, the process of privatization frequently was not transparent; the de facto embezzling of state-owned assets and taking them into one's own hands or striking bargains was prevalent. Corporate executives and party and state elites during the Soviet era would use their status, personal contacts, and insider information to build up enormous personal assets in a short period; meanwhile, the vast majority of the people did not participate in the benefits of privatization, resulting in a wider gap between the rich and poor (on the Russian case, see Freeland 2000).

In addition to such "barbarous" privatization, another remarkable factor in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union was the weakening of state functions, with the economic crisis as a backdrop and the accompanying social disorder and anarchic situation (Rigi 2004). Not only did state control weaken in all areas, but the state could not fully provide basic public services and the lives of Kazakhstan's people fell into disorder. Civil servant salaries were delayed or reduced, and public institutions did not receive the goods and expenses they needed. The standard theory is that low civil servant salaries invite corruption, but the fact that "self-sufficiency" is obliged by public institutions in Kazakhstan is also regarded as a factor behind the growth of corruption. The approach of covering expenses with bribes sought from the public remains as an excuse for receiving bribes, even if economic conditions later improve and public expenses are provided for (there are also cases, as noted above, where the burden of expenses incurred in business is still imposed on staff).

Also, in the mid-1990s, with the worsening of public safety, gangs (*bandity*) became prevalent as the protectors of economic activities. Some of them are said to

have later obtained work with law-enforcement authorities. The prevalence of corruption in these public institutions is thought to also be an effect from the entry of the gangs.⁴

Based on the testimonies of my interview subjects, it seems that the customs, work ethics, and personnel of the Soviet era remained in place for some years after independence. That began to change considerably in the mid-1990s, an era that can be called the turning point.

From *blat* to bribe

In the 1990s, therefore, factors existed that served to encourage corruption such as non-transparent privatization and social disruption. Many of the people I interviewed said that corruption grew at this time. However, Bulgarian political scientist Ivan Krastev notes that when comparing the situation with an era that was different to begin with, it is impossible to prove scientifically whether corruption increased or decreased; the subjective awareness that people have about the worsening of corruption is not something that should be regarded as is as an objective fact. He argues that what should be examined is not actually whether "corruption grew" or not, but rather why people have come to perceive that it did. Against the backdrop of the discourse on worsening corruption that spread in the former Soviet Union and countries of Eastern Europe, Krastev points out that the *blat*, which had been widely practiced during the socialist period and was socially tolerated, was replaced by the overt taking of bribes. Under socialist economies where shortages were ongoing, people had to depend on personal connections in the course of leading their daily lives; these connections were called "*blat*" in Russian slang. Alena Ledeneva, the leading scholar on corruption in Russia, has defined *blat* as "the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures" (Ledeneva 1998: 1). According to Ledeneva, *blat* was not associated with receiving money; accordingly, the spirit of and reliance on mutual aid was stressed, and frequently one could not ask for a quid pro quo right away. For that reason, *blat* was justified with the rhetoric of altruistic "friendship," and the "help" that was exchanged was obtained at the expense of state property or by sacrificing the gains of the person

⁴ Based on fieldwork conducted in the Russian city of Iaroslavl' in 1995, Ries (2002) points out that the gangs are seen as embodying a certain kind of justice because economic activities are not realized without the patronage of gangs and also because the average Russian citizen regards the state itself as well as the "new Russians" who built up enormous wealth with improper methods as corrupt.

who had the right to receive it officially (Ledeneva 1998).

With the introduction of the market economy and people becoming able to freely obtain goods and services so long as they had money, the role of *blat* was greatly reduced. For all that, the custom of using personal connections to deal with problems informally itself did not disappear. However, the personal connections changed to become more businesslike; paying money naturally received greater emphasis when it came to the benefits someone worked to get, and notion of mutual aid became rare. The *blat* of the past was underpinned by long-term emotional relationships; what one sees now, however, are one-time only relationships in which bribes and "gifts" are passed on and these relationships are terminated once the objective has been achieved (and in some cases even if it is not).

The reciprocal *blat* that developed in Soviet times mostly became monetized with the shift to market economics. The "mutual aid" of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" (*ia tebe, ty mne*) changed into a sterile relationship where the service received is offset each time by money. In that event, the amount of the bribe is calculated based on the job and status being supplied, the importance of the benefit being sought after, and so forth. It could be said that nostalgia for the *blat*—that it was more "humble" and "had a human touch"—lies behind people bemoaning the post-independence mammonism compared to the Soviet era. Based on the interviews conducted for the present study, it became clear that while many of the interview subjects were not opposed to making use of connections, they did have a sense that receiving money was "not good." However, for the younger generations born and raised since the 1990s, it seems that the social code of solving things with money is already firmly in place, and the psychological resistance to bribes is weaker.

Tentative conclusion

To sum up, the following points can be highlighted regarding everyday corruption in Kazakhstan. In post-independence Kazakhstan, the use of bribes and personal connections is an everyday fact that the average person widely practices. While the spread of corruption worries them, they actively take advantage of a corrupt system for their own benefit. They are simultaneously victims of corruption as well as its beneficiaries, and they also confess to being as such.

Corruption in Kazakhstan, similarly to corruption in other countries pointed out in previous research, is not just a self act by an individual, but happens systemically and constantly, and for that reason it is an informal norm. The splitting of bribes and

passing on of tributes to superiors, the setting of prices with various factors in mind, the anonymizing of bribe recipients through the intermediation of third parties, and the like correspond to that. In addition, it can be said that there is a widely known "etiquette" involving such elements, such as the person giving the bribe not trying to ask the intermediary for more information than is necessary, and silently using only memos that are then destroyed immediately when haggling over price. These patterns serve to avert conflicts between the people involved and smooth out negotiations while also feeding into the reproduceability of corruption.

In resolving various problems, the widespread implementation of methods such as using informal networks to avoid official routes is also a custom from Soviet times. However, under a planned economy where shortages of goods were ongoing, people would exchange among networks of "friends" certain goods and services they could access in their work or for other reasons. Today, however, for everything from school performance, the marks obtained on a university entrance examination, and obtaining a doctorate to getting a driver's license or civil service job, avoiding conscription or prison time, and winning a favorable court judgement are all things that are "sold" for cash and the rhetoric of "mutual help" is no longer used.

The Kazakhstan government is also undertaking a variety of anti-corruption measures such as introducing E-government services, visualizing police interrogation by installing video cameras, unifying all the access points for citizen services by setting up a Population Service Center (Tsentr obsluzhivaniia naseleniia, TsON), reforming the civil service, working harder to uncover corruption, and encouraging whistle blowing through cash rewards. Some measures are having a modicum of success, but it is also a fact that ways of outsmarting the new system will regularly be discovered. To reduce corruption in Kazakhstan, before invoking such norms as "rule of law" and "privatization", it would be important to understand within the local context the thinking and behavior patterns of the people who are reproducing corruption.

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