

## The High Cost of a Kazakh Education

Sarah Gray

May 3, 2006

Sergei Pokopenko joins his professor for lunch with five other university students. If they want an “A” in the class, she tells them, they can pay her 3,000 tenge (\$25); for a “B,” 2,000 (\$15). Aibek Sarsenov tries to save enough money to “buy” an internship at a bank. The cost? 12,000 tenge (\$100). Aigul Sarsenbayevna, a 50 year-old University English teacher, doesn’t receive her salary for 3 months and begins taking bribes from her students so she can pay for her own daughter to “pass” exams.

These are just a handful of the people I knew during the two years I taught at universities in Kazakhstan who griped about corruption in education but felt forced to participate in it.

This former Soviet republic has experienced the highest annual economic growth in Central Asia over the past five years, largely due to Western investment in its vast oil reserves. The money may be flowing, but it is not necessarily clean. Transparency International, the London-based watchdog group, recently ranked Kazakhstan the 107th most corrupt country out of 158, far worse than much poorer countries. Some say this corruption is a remnant of the Soviet system, and most agree it has become more rampant in spite of government claims to wipe it out. In fact, the government seems more like a role model of corruption rather than a leader in the fight against it.

In 2002, the story broke that President Nursultan Nazarbayev had secretly stashed more than \$1 billion of state money in a Swiss bank account from the sale of oilfield rights to ExxonMobil. With the help of James Giffen, an American lawyer and oil executive, almost \$60 million was also illegally transferred to two former prime ministers of Kazakhstan, other high level government officials and members of the president’s family. Oil profits, often heralded as the miracle salve for Kazakhstan’s economy, haven’t necessarily helped cure the country’s corruption condition.

To many, the corruption of communism has simply morphed into that of capitalism and spread to most other industries. Far away from oil executives and bigwig politicians, quiet deals are being made in the classrooms of Kazakhstan’s colleges and universities. When it comes to higher education, many students quickly find out it’s not what you know, it’s what you’ll pay.

“I think corruption in education is one of the more harmful forms,” said Professor Jenik Radon of Columbia University, who has studied corruption extensively in Georgia and Estonia. “If you’re accustomed to paying for your grades, if you’re going to get a degree and maybe pay for that too,” Radon said, “then you’re forming very bad habits for society.”

The most prevalent forms of corruption in education are paying for course or exam grades or to gain entrance into a university. Prices range from fifteen dollars for an average grade to several thousand for admission to a top school. In a country where the average monthly salary is \$275, coming up with the money can replace studying as some students’ main goal for the semester.

For teachers, whose average monthly salary is \$125, bribing has become a way to supplement their low pay. Professors often work at multiple institutions and teach up to 10 different subjects. Many young teachers actually leave the profession for higher paying jobs in the growing private sector. During Soviet times, teachers enjoyed social prestige, amenable working conditions and decent pay. But even then, the system was corrupt. And according to Radon, “the corruption has gotten worse.”

“There’s more at stake, more things to buy with what you get,” Radon said. “There was never really a break with Soviet petty corruption, but there’s now more incentive.”

The gap between rich and poor remains wide in Kazakhstan, but the middle class is growing. At the same time, university tuition rates are rising rapidly. An acute fiscal and budget crisis in the 1990s shifted educational costs from the central government to students and their families. In the past 10 years, state grants and awards have declined, making competition for them fierce. A grant requires high grades and exam scores, and if a student hasn’t earned them, the books can be changed with the right price.

Economics aside, many believe that a culture of corruption has taken over.

“There is a trend in public thought that everything can be bought,” said Marzhan Serekova, a 19 year-old International Relations student. “It’s strange when someone *doesn’t* give bribes, not vice versa. Students who bribe carry this habit throughout their lives.”

Serekova attends The Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics, and Strategic Research (KIMEP) in Almaty, known locally as the “Harvard of Central Asia.” Modeled after North American and European Universities, its staff is a mix of local and foreign professors. It is one of the very few corruption-free universities in Kazakhstan and the most prestigious in the country, if not the region.

Ironically, pervasive corruption coincides with a sense of disdain for it. “People are indignant about corruption and say it should be eliminated,” said Daniyar Alisherov, an Ecology instructor at Southern Kazakhstan State University, “but at the same time they contradict themselves by giving bribes.”

But as Matthew Brady found out, simply raising the issue can have serious consequences. As a Peace Corps volunteer, Brady taught English for Economics at a Kazakh university from 2001 to 2003. When Brady read about Nazarbayev’s secret Swiss account, he decided to raise the issue in his course “as a current event related to Economics,” he said. The discussion soon turned to corruption in education.

“I had a meeting with several of the student council members at my school and asked about the history they’d had with bribery and whether or not they understood the consequences of it,” Brady said. A month later, he received an official reprimand from the Peace Corps Country Director stating: “Comments and/or information that you gave to your students are considered to be inappropriate by local authorities.” The university terminated his position, and the Peace Corps re-assigned him to a small business development project.

If local authorities can so easily silence an American, it’s no surprise that students don’t readily protest the problem. In fact, Brady later found out that the university had sent one student to the meeting to act as an informer.

“Who knows what he got in return for that,” Brady said.

Neither Brady nor I were offered bribes in exchange for good grades, but it was no secret that the grades in our books were far from permanent. Brady, who had the deputy mayor’s daughter in his class, said the students would simply laugh when he said she would fail his class for showing up less than five times in one school year.

Last month, Nazarbayev signed a new presidential decree on stepping up the fight against corruption and strengthening discipline in state bodies. The government has also issued statements specifically condemning corruption in education, but their actions to combat it have yielded few results. In 2004, Kazakhstan introduced standardized tests with written instead of oral entrance exams, aiming for more objective scoring. Administrators purportedly changed the answers on these tests in some cases in exchange for bribes.

Furthermore, many NGO development projects “focus on ‘safe’ areas of education like curriculum and teaching methods,” a 2004 UNESCO report on corruption in education in the region pointed out, “and less on issues of corruption, ethics and mal-practice.”

What’s the solution then?

“Unfortunately, there’s no silver bullet,” Radon said. “It requires good payment - that’s the minimum. And training.”

Perhaps most importantly, the cure for corruption requires a shift in attitude. “It requires the population to believe that the civic order, that the institutions owe them something” Radon went on. “If you don’t demand the authorities for something, then you could, in a way, care less.”

“It’s about honest salaries for honest work,” he said.