



## “A feisty reality show could jump start the process by exposing the endless absurdities of how officials gouge entrepreneurs”

**Sharon Tennison, President Center for Citizen Initiatives (CCI), describes how a reality TV show could prove a catalyst for counteracting corruption**

Many believe that if ordinary Russians really understood corruption's stranglehold on business and the country's future, current apathy would be dumped for outrage in a heartbeat. So far, however, the message hasn't got out to the masses. What better way to expose Russia's endemic corruption than to throw a witty TV spotlight on the ridiculous manoeuvres that Russian entrepreneurs endure 365 days a year? How about a TV reality show, or comedy series, which follows a dozen or so entrepreneurs whose lives are continually wrapped around bureaucratic axels?

Since admonitions and laws haven't worked, public embarrassment might – who wants their offspring to inquire if Dad indulges in the bribe-taking displayed on TV screens across the nation? The big C word in Russia has been taboo for too long. Like an elephant in the living room, all register its presence, but ignore it. Why? These behaviours and dependences on “connections” are so woven into the fabric of Russian life that Russians can't fathom how they could operate without them. However, Singapore's corruption was equally pervasive until the '60s, when a new government exerted political will and took a hard stance including quick trials, immediate incarceration and in the worst cases, the death penalty. Corruption was soon a disgrace and socially unacceptable. Today, Singapore is a model of transparency and a booming economy.

Our experience with corruption in Russia comes through interacting with thousands of Russia's entrepreneurs in CCI's management training programmes. For years I raged against regional officials who shamelessly extorted with every signature and business deal. It looked like a one-way street: power against small business. Then it became clear it was a two-way street, where some entrepreneurs profited as much as office

holders by developing 'smooth relations'. Well-off entrepreneurs palmed quick cash and got quick service, while smaller entrepreneurs got extorted or ignored. As a result, distrust and resentment simmered between layers of entrepreneurs. This insidious suspicion prevented entrepreneurs from uniting against corruptors. The development of Russia's nascent small and medium-sized business sectors has been slow to get off the ground as a result.

No side is solely to blame, not office holders, the Russian government, and certainly not the entrepreneurs. In the '90s, office holders were desperate – earning symbolic salaries, they extorted to feed their families; the Yeltsin government was disinterested in over and under-the-table deals which lubricated business from top to bottom. Entrepreneurs cut corners where possible to build businesses in this chaos. Russia's corruption is a natural consequence of history, inexperience, economic and political instability, defunct judiciary and law enforcement, and a people acclimated to a failed corrupt system. Further, Russians' proclivity to sweeten official interactions with something of value morphed into officials rapidly becoming predatory in this environment.

Existing relationships between business and officialdom in Russia have been something like that of co-joined Siamese twins. Critical veins and arteries are used by both, with essential organs and structural components shared, ligaments and nerve endings intertwined. With separate hearts, brains and appendages, separation is possible – but painstaking, staged dissection is required to avoid disaster. Russia must undertake this process.

Concurrently, a public awareness campaign must be erected from top to bottom: education of the masses through TV and print media, education in schools and

universities, education of entrepreneurs and associations, and radical education of public office holders plus the creation of a new cadre of graduates for official public positions throughout Russia. This combination has worked in other countries – it can work across Russia.

World experience shows that unflinching will from the leadership of the country is a must. Simultaneously, entrepreneurs must unite from the bottom up and push with all their combined force. Only then will the entrenched, corrupted fog of officials and bureaucrats between top and bottom, be forced to change.

Corruption reduction in the world is now practically a science – the same technologies work regardless of the country. Russia is different from other nations, yes, but in this sphere, not unique. Experts from Transparency International, OECD, Germany, Finland, Singapore, Hong Kong, Chile and elsewhere could be invited to study Russia's existing situation – and to share strategies regarding how Russia could proceed along the lines of the world's experience. Next, an open dialogue on the taboo topic needs to take place across the country in schools, universities, work places and public forums.

A feisty reality show could jump start the process by exposing the endless absurdities of how officials gouge entrepreneurs, how entrepreneurs manipulate bureaucrats to survive, and the concrete costs to Russian society for this covert activity which infests the entire country. It would shed light on the wimps in power, the heroes in business, courageous entrepreneurs who take on corruption, the few who put corrupt officials behind bars, and what would happen if lots of business owners unite to play it straight by collectively saying, “NO!”

A provocative TV spectacular on corruption is long over due. Russians would love it! 