

# Subjective Assessment of Spread of Corrupt Practices by the Population of Russian Regions

Boris V. Zalivanskiy\*, Elena V. Samokhvalova

*Institute of economics and management, Belgorod State National Research University, 308015 Belgorod, Russia*

*\*Corresponding author. Email: zalivansky@bsu.edu.ru*

## ABSTRACT

The materials of this article are based on the results of the study "Assessment of the corruption level in the Belgorod region" that was conducted in October-November 2019. The study was carried out on the basis of the methodology stipulated in the regulatory document of the Russian Federation Government (resolution No. 662). One of the research goals was to assess the level of petty corruption. For this purpose, 600 residents of the Belgorod region from 16 localities were involved in the survey. According to the data obtained during the survey, a qualitative and quantitative analysis of corruption in the region was conducted, the structure of corruption, its causes and conditions were identified. The effectiveness of anti-corruption measures, as well as public awareness of them, was assessed. In conclusion, recommendations are formulated that can help minimize corrupt practices and increase public confidence in government anti-corruption measures.

**Keywords:** *corruption, Russian regions, sociological survey, authorities*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The problem of corruption spreading has long gone beyond the borders of individual states. The inclusion of corrupt practices both in business processes and in petty interaction between people causes enormous damage to economic development and political reputation not only in modern Russia [1–3], but also in most countries across the world [4, 5].

The lack of effectiveness of anti-corruption measures implemented by the subjects of anti-corruption policy, in particular, is due to their lack of objective understanding of the extent of corrupt practices [6, 7].

In this regard, the issues of assessing corruption are constantly in the focus of attention of representatives from academia.

Most researchers agree that the "shadow" nature of corruption transactions does not allow us to assess the scope of corruption using objective indicators, which can include, for example, the number of detected corruption-related crimes or the average size of a corruption transaction in a particular area [8].

In addition, the interpretation of these indicators and their dynamics is also significantly difficult due to the lack of globally recognized approaches and assessment methods. Thus, a decrease in the number of corruption-related crimes may indicate both a reduction in the scope of corruption and a decrease in the operational efficiency of law enforcement agencies in detecting such crimes. This, in turn, may be caused by the growth of their (agencies) corruption.

Partially, the way out of this situation may be to supplement objective data with measuring the population's subjective perception of the scope of corruption in the

territory of their residence. At the same time we would agree with Benjamin A. Olken, who noted that "measuring perceptions about corruption rather than corruption itself skirts the inherent difficulties involved in measuring corruption directly but raises the question of how those being surveyed form their perceptions in the first place, and how accurate those reported perceptions actually are" [6].

Modern authors state that the population's subjective perception of authorities' actions, including anti-corruption measures, is formed not only taking into account one's personal corruption experience [9], but also under the influence of mass media that broadcast relevant content on the Internet [10], especially when covering mega-events [11]. At the same time, the growth in the number of publications about new cases of corruption negatively correlates with population's perception of the scope of corruption, and leads to further reproduction of corrupt practices in a situation when corruption becomes an informal norm.

At the same time, a serious consequence of the spread of such ideas is a decline of trust in public institutions [12, 13]. This is especially true for young people, "for whom the corruption issue is a main reason why they have lost interest in talking about politics and government" [14]. In this regard, the authorities, like no other, are interested in an objective assessment of corruption and informing the residents of their territories about its results.

## 2. METHODS

This study was conducted in accordance with the methodology for engaging in sociological research aimed at assessing the level of corruption in the constituent entities of the Russian Federation that was approved by

Decree No. 662 of the Russian Federation government on May 25, 2019 (hereinafter – the Methodology).

For the purposes of this study, several administrative-territorial units of the Belgorod region were selected: Belgorod city (region center), Valuiki city, Gubkin city, Belgorodskiy district, Valuiskiy district, Gubkinskiy district, Korochanskiy district, Krasnogvardeyskiy district, Starooskolskiy district, Shebekinskiy district. In the selected administrative divisions, the proportion of urban and rural residents to the total population aged 18 and over is 67.33% and 32.67% respectively, which is very close to the regional level.

Belgorod region belongs to the regions with average population, as the territory of the region is home to 1,547,418 people. Taking into account this indicator, the number of representative sampling units in this study is determined as 600 respondents. In accordance with the gender and age structure of the region population, women predominate in the sampled population (54.8% vs. 45.2% of the men surveyed).

Almost every fourth respondent (25.3%) is a Belgorodian over the age of 60, and almost every fifth is aged between 31 and 40 years (19.2%) or between 51 and 60 years (19.0%). The smallest group of respondents is young people from 18 to 20 years (3.8%). Among the surveyed citizens the residents of the regional center predominate (45.8%), while the share of the respondents living in cities of regional significance is 14.3%.

The sampling structure includes a significant proportion of Belgorodians living in rural localities (32.7% of respondents) while the residents of cities and urban-type settlements of district significance comprise only 7.2%. In over half of the cases (52.3%) the income level of the respondents who took part in the study is average – according to them, they barely earn enough money for basic purchases.

At the same time, a prominent place in the sampling structure is occupied by low-income residents of Belgorod (21.3% of respondents described their income as “below average” and another 15.3% as “very low”). Only 2.3% of respondents have no financial difficulties.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

#### ***3.1. Motives of participants in corrupt practices***

One of the ways of qualitative and quantitative assessment of petty corruption defined by the Methodology is to determine the main motives that encourage residents to engage into corrupt relations.

It should be clarified that, in accordance with the logic of the questionnaire, questions about motives were addressed only to those respondents who assessed the situation of interaction with representatives of state (municipal) institutions as corrupt. In this study, there were 225 people, 140 of whom knew, assumed or felt that in order to solve their problem that has recently arisen it might have

been needed to pay a bribe to an official, while 85 respondents noted the absolute necessity for informal remuneration of an official at the time of their last appeal.

When it comes to the types of corruption, modern researchers allocate three of them: corruption of survival (including the poorest category of the population, for example, an old woman gives fifty rubles to a nurse for the services in the hospital), corruption of comfort (participants are basically “middle class” members of the population who bribe, for example, to obtain a document in the shortest possible time) and corruption of prestige (participants are the most affluent citizens who bribe, for example, to buy status for money).

The analysis of the survey results showed that over a third of respondents (35.6%) are ready to take the initiative and reward an official for getting a 100% result; another third (33.3%) would decide to pay a bribe if they knew in advance that their issue could not be resolved without it without it. Thus, almost 70% of the Belgorodians are already ready to resort to informal ways to solve their problems before the corruption situation arises. On the contrary, the proportion of those who would offer a bribe under pressure or after a hint from an official is relatively smaller (10.2%). 20.9% of the respondents found it difficult to answer.

The respondents’ motives are more clearly shown when answering the next question, when only 11.6% hope to get a result or be provided with a service already assigned to the functions of the government institution (an official). Probably, in such cases, the initiative comes from an official himself. On the contrary, 26.7% are willing to “pay” for speeding up the solution of their problem, another 18.7% – for quality and 15.1% for minimizing difficulties in the process of appeal, including bribing on their own initiative.

All this data might suggest that the main motive of those involved in the corrupt deals is not the corruption of “survival” – when turning to government institutions without a bribe means that the problem will not be solved - but the corruption of “comfort”, when clients are willing to incur costs for extra “convenience”.

However, 20.9% of respondents in Belgorod are sure that a bribe does not guarantee anything, which probably caused difficulties when answering the previous question. 7.1% of respondents were unable to determine the main result of paying a bribe.

As for the prevalence of anti-corruption behavior, it was relatively easy for the majority of respondents from Belgorod (84%) to explain why they would not participate in corruption relations. The most significant of them is the presence of personal anti-corruption values and attitudes – 21.8% said that they do not give bribes even if everyone does, and 17.8% noted that they are disgusted to do it. The next most popular responses are “I can get what I need without bribes, my own way” (14.2%) and “it is too expensive for me” (12.9%).

The inevitability of punishment scares only 5.3% of the region residents. Probably the latent nature of corruption-related crimes forms the citizens’ perception of the probability of punishment for such acts to be insignificant.

Among the options included in the “other” category were the opinions that officials “have to perform their duties without bribes”, “it is illegal” and “it is not that bad to give a bribe only to certain categories, for example, a doctor”. A resident of the Belgorod region who got into a corruption situation and agreed to pay a bribe will have to spend 25% more than the amount of the average annual monthly income per capita, since the average size of a bribe in petty corruption deals is 38 342 rubles. Nowadays, there is an increasing number of publications suggesting that despite the formal ban in Russia, corruption has long been an informal norm and

participation in such relationships has become a socially approved behavior [15]. The analysis of the results of this survey partially confirms this idea. Almost a third of respondents (27.3%) condemn neither those who offer nor those who take bribes. These respondents probably are those ready to “pay extra” for the speed and quality of the received state (municipal) services. The opinions of the other participants divided: one in five (20%) blames those who take, only 4% blame those who pay, and 39.2% blame both parties of the corrupt deal. Almost one in ten found it difficult to answer this question (Table 1).

**Table 1** Distribution of answers to the question “People have different attitudes to those who offer bribes and to those who take them. Which of the following points of view is closer to you?”

Answer Options \ Values	%
I condemn both those who give bribes and those who take them	39.2
I condemn those who offer bribes; don't condemn those who take them	4.0
I do not condemn those who give bribes; condemn those who take them	20.0
I condemn neither those who give bribes nor those who take them	27.3
this question is hard to answer	9.5

### **3.2. Prevalence of corrupt practices**

The most important value that determines the anti – corruption behavior of the participants of interaction “citizens-government” is honesty. As part of this study, the region residents were asked to assess the authorities’ integrity and their freedom from corruption at different levels. The results of the survey suggest that Belgorod residents perceive the municipal government to be a little more honest and free from corruption than the regional one.

Thus, the total share of those who consider the regional government to be more or less honest is 22.9% compared to 27% of those who say the same about the municipal government. A small margin in the estimates is probably due to the proximity of the authorities of rural municipalities to the residents, the visibility of their real “small” actions and, as a result, a lot of trust in them.

The same results are obtained among those who to some extent consider the government dishonest, not free from corruption – the region residents respond about the regional authority in this way a little more often (49.9% against 45.6% who describe the municipal government negatively). In both cases, about a quarter of respondents found it difficult to answer.

Thus, almost half of the region residents describe the regional and municipal authorities as dishonest, not free from corruption. At the same time such judgments are not always based on personal experience, but are often formed taking into account information from informal sources and under the influence of relevant publications in the media.

In the course of the study, the respondents were asked to assess how often in their city (settlement, village) such

people, as they are, have to deal with bribery and corruption in various situations (circumstances) of their interaction with government representatives.

It turned out that Belgorod residents consider the following situation corrupted: getting free medical care in a polyclinic (tests, doctor’s appointments, etc.), in a hospital (serious treatment, surgery, etc.) (6.7%); studying at a University (enrollment, transfer from one University to another, exams and tests, diploma, etc.) (5.8%); getting a job, ensuring promotion (5.5%); handling the situation with the traffic police (getting a license, technical inspection, violation of traffic rules, etc.) (4.8%); receiving services as for repair and maintenance of housing from maintenance services (housing complex operator, etc.) (4.2%).

Moreover, getting free medical care, studying at a University and getting a necessary job top the rating of those circumstances, in which you have to face corruption quite often (12.7%, 12.0% and 8%, respectively) and “from time to time” (15.7%, 9.5%, 9.2%). The objectivity of the rating for the first three positions, as will be shown below, is also confirmed by the personal experience of the respondents.

In their turn, the following situations are considered by the residents to be free from corruption: applying for registration at their place of residence, passport or foreign passport, etc. (65.7% of respondents indicated that in these situations people like them never have to face bribery), register real estate transactions (houses, apartments, garages, etc.) (60.7%), apply for a pension (59.7%), receive social benefits (59.3%), go to court (58.0%) or seek help from the police (57.8%).

It should be noted that in the first two cases the reduction in the risk of corruption seems to be associated with the

introduction of electronic forms of interaction with applicants.

The other options had such a share of responses, because of a number of reasons including the focus of their services on certain categories of citizens, not on all residents of the region. Consequently, some respondents could make an assessment without relying on their personal experience.

Thus, a little over 40% of residents of the region note a high level of petty corruption primarily arising in situations of receiving free medical care, studying at a University, employment and promotion.

The least corrupt turned out to be the situations that were the most formalized in terms of administrative procedures – for example, obtaining registration at the place of residence, a passport or a foreign passport, which are, as a rule, federal services.

**3.3. Dynamics of corruption and effectiveness of anti-corruption measures**

This study was aimed at identifying the level of respondents’ awareness about the anti-corruption measures taken. The results show that a little over the half of Belgorodians (55%) are more or less informed about the anti-corruption policy implemented by government

representatives at different levels. 12.8% of them are really interested in such information and follow the progress of anti-corruption measures, 18.0% know something, but do not follow it in particular, while another 24.2% have heard something, but cannot remember anything definite.

At the same time, a fairly large proportion of the region residents (40.7%) know almost nothing about anti-corruption measures implemented at the state and municipal levels. This fits into the picture of poor public awareness of the authorities’ activities, which was formed not only because of the lack of openness of the latter, but also because of the population’ weak interest in information of this kind. Another 4.3% of respondents found it difficult to answer the question (Table 2).

The respondents, who are informed about measures against corruption, were asked to assess the efforts the authorities make in that direction. It turned out that the government’s focus on fighting against corruption is questionable for most residents of the region – the answer “they do everything possible” was chosen only by 7.8% of respondents, while the answer “they do a lot” – only by 6.8%.

On the contrary, “they do little” and “do nothing” are the most popular options among respondents; they obtained 40.9% and 31.0% of the votes, respectively. The total of 13.4% found it difficult to assess the authorities’ actions or did not answer the question.

**Table 2** Distribution of answers to the question “Are you aware of the measures the authorities are taking to combat corruption?”

<b>Answer Options \ Values</b>	<b>%</b>
I am and constantly read news about upcoming measures	12.8
I am, but I don’t specifically follow it	18.0
I heard (heard) something, but I can’t remember anything specific	24.2
Don't know anything about it	40.7
This question is hard to answer	4.3

A crucial role in the fight against corruption is undoubtedly played by the political will of top officials. With regard to the situation in the Belgorod region, almost a third of respondents believe that the authorities have such a will. Thus, almost every eighth Belgorod citizen (11.8%) is sure that the leadership of our region is willing and able to fight petty corruption effectively while another 15.2% do not doubt the intentions of the regional government to defeat bribery, but they state that the government is not able to fight it effectively.

On the contrary, a little over 50% of the region residents indicated that the government does not want to fight corruption while 20.8% of them pointed to the powerlessness of government institutions as the reason for this state of things. The choice of such options may be determined by the common attitude to the authorities, not only a low assessment of the implemented anti-corruption

measures and poor awareness of the authorities’ activities in this field.

As for the vector of changes in the situation with corruption in the city (settlement, village), where the respondent lives, the most popular option was that the level of corruption has not changed over the past year (36.3% of respondents chose it). About the same number (38.7%) found it difficult to answer. The optimists, who noticed that the level of corruption decreased, gained only 8.7% of all respondents while the share of those, who noted that the level of corruption had increased, was twice as large (16.3%).

As for the regional level, the number of those who found it difficult to answer is relatively higher (44.1% against 38.7% who found it difficult to assess the dynamics of corruption in the municipality). At the same time, the overall assessment of the situation is less positive

compared to the previous years: +2.2% of those who indicated that there is more corruption, -7.1% of respondents who estimated that the level of corruption has not changed and -0.5% of respondents who noted positive changes.

It is worth noting that Belgorod residents considered themselves more informed about the scope of corruption in the country – there are relatively less respondents who found it difficult to answer this question (12.7% less than when assessing the situation in the municipality and 18.7% less than when assessing the situation in the region). This seems to be due to more active coverage of such cases in the media. The information presented to citizens forms a picture of the large-scale spread of this phenomenon and lacks a depiction of effective measures to reduce the level of corruption.

As a result, while almost the same proportion of “optimists” (about 8%) believes that the level of corruption has decreased in all three cases, a certain part of respondents saying that its scope remains the same at the regional and municipal levels. They believe that on the federal level the number of corrupt deals has significantly increased (the share of such answers is 23.4% more than the number of answers concerning the municipal level and 21.2% more than the number of answers concerning the regional level).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The imperfection of administrative processes contribute to manifestations of corruption in the Belgorod region. Despite the efforts made in the region to improve the efficiency of public (municipal) services, consumers are still not satisfied with their quality and availability. As a result, they either initiate corrupt relations, because this is more reliable, or they tacitly follow an informally established procedure of interacting with officials in the hope of getting a 100% result. In this regard, the work can be organized in three directions.

Firstly, we should continue to regulate administrative procedures improving existing regulations in terms of their optimal use for consumers.

Secondly, the services that require minimal participation of citizens are considered to be the most convenient and comfortable for them. In this regard, the practice of expanding the list of services provided in electronic form or through the Multifunctional Center for Provision of State and Municipal Services should be developed. It is probably necessary to consider extending the functionality of standard municipal portals by making it possible to obtain municipal services in electronic form, if possible, or information about them. Besides, it is necessary to continue to train various categories of population to use such services.

Thirdly, for many consumers the process of getting a service is still not clear or transparent – as a result, they are ready to pay a bribe to an official so that they do not spend time to figure it out themselves. In this regard, it is necessary to ensure that consumers are informed as much

as possible in an accessible form about the process of providing services, the timing of administrative actions, responsible persons and opportunities to obtain information or appeal the result.

The factor that stimulates the spread of petty corruption is the lack of anti-corruption attitudes and behavior patterns among the population. Only about one in five said that he ultimately does not pay bribes, even if everyone does. About 13% of the region residents confirmed that they have experience of paying a bribe in a corrupt situation. In this regard, it is necessary to facilitate educational work among young people and information and awareness-raising work among adults in Belgorod.

As for educational work, it should include measures for the youngest category of children to develop the values of honesty and justice. In turn, educational activities for secondary and high school pupils and students should be aimed at explaining the norms of anti-corruption legislation, the causes and consequences of corruption, the role of everyone in its spread, the inevitability of punishment for offenses, and it should be implemented using modern forms of data submission.

In order to carry out information and awareness-raising work among adults, if possible, it is necessary to organize an information campaign aimed at formation of standards of anti-corruption behavior. Enterprises (organizations) should introduce the practice of adopting anti-corruption compliance – a corporate anti-corruption program (policy) that will help reduce the risks of committing corruption-related crimes, causing damage to the organization (enterprise) because of using its material resources for personal gain or enrichment.

The image of a corrupt official, as well as the widespread idea of “everybody steals”, is formed predominantly with the help of the media, which publish revealing materials and create additional favorable background for the spread of corruption. In this regard, it is necessary to work on purposeful formation of the image of an honest official, work on informing the population about the authorities’ activities, increase the openness and transparency of the activities of state (municipal) institutions. In institutions, it is necessary to finalize or develop, in the absence thereof, departmental anti-corruption programs and inform the public about the results of their implementation.

The population of the region is still insufficiently informed about the authorities’ intentions to defeat corruption and about the results of anti-corruption work carried out at the regional and municipal levels. At the same time, almost half of Belgorod residents consider the regional and municipal authorities dishonest. In this regard, it is necessary to declare the political will of the regional top officials, municipalities, and state (municipal) institutions openly, as well as to start and conduct radical and ferocious fight against corruption.

As a rule, the leader’s personal example is more effective to motivate the subordinates to act than numerous restrictions and prohibitions. In addition, it is important to increase the residents’ awareness about the ongoing anti-corruption work. The content of the materials should be focused both on highlighting the results of the authorities’

work to prevent corruption and punish those responsible and on forming an idea about improving the process of providing state (municipal) services.

As for information about the facts of corruption, it is important to “bring” the newsworthy event to its logical end (detection of the violation - investigation – punishment) forming the public opinion about the inevitability of punishment for corruption-related crimes.

## REFERENCES

- [1] M. Zaloznaya, W.M. Reisinger, V.H. Claypool, When civil engagement is part of the problem: Flawed anti-corruptionism in Russia and Ukraine, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 51(3) (2017) 245-255. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.06.003>
- [2] T. Larsson, Reform, corruption, and growth: Why corruption is more devastating in Russia than in China, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39(2) (2006) 265-281. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2006.03.005>
- [3] N. Zakharov, Does corruption hinder investment? Evidence from Russian regions, *European Journal of Political Economy* 56 (2019) 39-61. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2018.06.005>
- [4] A. Mohamadi, J. Peltonen, J. Wincent, Government efficiency and corruption: A country-level study with implications for entrepreneurship, *Journal of Business Venturing Insights* 8 (2017) 50-55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbvi.2017.06.002>
- [5] M. Joly, Corruption: The shortcut to disaster, *Sustainable Production and Consumption* 10 (2017) 133-156. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.spc.2016.09.005>
- [6] B.A. Olken, Corruption perceptions vs. corruption reality, *Journal of Public Economics* 93(7-8) (2009) 950-964. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2009.03.001>
- [7] D. Ryvkin, D. Serra, J. Tremewan, I paid a bribe: An experiment on information sharing and extortionary corruption, *European Economic Review* 94 (2017) 1-22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.euroecorev.2017.02.003>
- [8] P. Budsaratragoon, B. Jitmaneeroj, A critique on the Corruption Perceptions Index: An interdisciplinary approach, *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences* (2019). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.seps.2019.100768>
- [9] M. Bertrand, S. Mullainathan, Do people mean what they say? Implications for subjective survey data, *American Economic Review* 91 (2001) 67-72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.91.2.67>
- [10] R.K. Goel, M.A. Nelson, M.A. Narett, The internet as an indicator of corruption awareness, *European Journal of Political Economy* 28(1) (2012) 64-75. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2011.08.003>
- [11] L. Olmos, H. Bellido, J.A. Román-Aso, The effects of mega-events on perceived corruption, *European Journal of Political Economy* 61 (2020). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2019.101826>
- [12] A. Solé-Ollé, P. Sorribas-Navarro, Trust no more? On the lasting effects of corruption scandals, *European Journal of Political Economy* 55 (2018) 185-203. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2017.12.003>
- [13] V. Shlapentokh, Trust in public institutions in Russia: The lowest in the world, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 39(2) (2006) 153-174. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2006.03.004>
- [14] S.O. Sihombing, Youth perceptions toward corruption and integrity: Indonesian context, *Kasetsart Journal of Social Sciences* 39 (2018) 299-304. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.kjss.2018.03.004>
- [15] T. Kachkina, A. Kachkin, Corruption and basic elements of the strategy of countering it, retrieved from: <https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=19829911>